

# **One Year Ago Today, Starbucks Workers Successfully Unionized Their First Café**

BY

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Workers at a Starbucks cafe in Buffalo, New York, were the first in the company to unionize one year ago today. The movement has grown rapidly since. We visited Starbucks union activists in five cities around the country to hear about the campaign.

One year ago today, workers at a Starbucks location on Elmwood Avenue in Buffalo, New York, voted to unionize. The victory marked a turning point at the company, which had successfully avoided labor organizing at its stores for decades. The vote stood out: in the United States, unionization was at a historic low, and the food service industry is notoriously hostile toward labor.

Few imagined that the US labor movement, at Starbucks and beyond, would grow so much over a single year. Union petitions are up by 57 percent from 2021, and at Starbucks, over six thousand workers have unionized.

Starbucks is the biggest coffeehouse chain in the world, employing around four hundred thousand people globally. The corporation encourages a familial culture in which coworkers are called “partners.”

In the public eye, Starbucks has long been perceived as a good employer, with an eye toward diversity and inclusion and decent contractual benefits, including medical insurance and the reimbursement of

college tuition fees for an online bachelor's degree at Arizona State University. This contrasts with allegations of abuse of leverage over employees — resulting in mistreatment, short staffing, and a suppression of complaints — that have helped spark the organizing drive.

Since the first Starbucks store voted to unionize on December 9, 2021, the effects have been felt throughout the country. The 257 stores that have won union votes will each bargain for separate contracts. After a long waiting period, during which union representatives accused Starbucks of purposeful delay, the majority of unionized stores received invitations to bargain a contract in October. Yet bargaining sessions are beginning slowly. On November 17, Starbucks workers in over one hundred stores went on strike to express their discontent with the company's pace in negotiating.

Starbucks has reacted to the union efforts with repression. The company's strategy was developed in cooperation with the lawyers at Littler Mendelson, a firm that specializes in fighting unions. This support comes at a high cost to the company: single days at court can be priced at hundreds of thousands of dollars. And it's come at a high cost to workers: the company has fought the workers tooth and nail every step of the way, attempting to exclude union members from the firm-wide introduction of wage raises and new benefits. This September, a new savings account for nonunionized employees was announced. Howard Schultz, the on-again, off-again CEO of Starbucks, has emphasized in numerous interviews and speeches that he will not accept unions as a part of Starbucks. Over one hundred fifty employees have been fired in the context of unionization, other workers are bound to lose their employment benefits as a result of being assigned too few shifts, and some stores have been closed entirely — including the first unionized café in Seattle, the company's hometown.

In the late summer, ahead of the one-year anniversary of unionization, we visited members of Starbucks Workers United in five cities across the country, grabbed a coffee, and listened to their stories.



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Laila photographed in New York City on September 5, 2022. (Courtesy of Johannes Hör)

“Had I known that I could unionize when I started working at Starbucks, I would have done that the second day I started working there — really, day two.” Laila is sitting on the sidewalk in Times Square, New York, and as we are talking, the previously visible exhaustion vanishes from her face. The nineteen-year-old took two flights to address the crowd of protesting Starbucks and Amazon workers earlier in the afternoon on this Labor Day Monday. Now, the protest march has crossed Manhattan, making its way from the apartment of Howard Schultz and the residence of Jeff Bezos, the head of Amazon, all the way to Times Square.

Laila’s hands get restless when she recounts her work environment: “My original store was a disaster. During COVID, they broke all the rules there are about employment of minors: I was working two shifts in a row, I worked two weeks straight — they just did it, because I was doing online school. I had to start an investigation so I could transfer to another store. My manager wanted to keep me because so many people had quit.”

After graduating high school, she became a shift supervisor at another store. Following a long hospital visit, management declined her requests to temporarily reduce her hours. Laila turned to an older coworker, Bill, for help: “I was talking to Bill and just wanted to quit — well, I didn’t want to, but I didn’t know what to do. Then he asked me if I wanted to unionize, and I felt like I had nothing to lose. So, I said yes, and we started to talk to our coworkers.” A few days later, on January 22, 2022, twelve

out of nineteen employees at the store in North Phoenix signed union cards. The third Starbucks store in Arizona was on its way toward unionization.

Repression set in immediately. The following Monday, Laila received a written warning for the first time in her two-year employment. Over months, investigations and write-ups kept coming in, and she started to record conversations with management as evidence. Shortly before the union vote, Laila was fired. Now, she is finishing her college degree, speaking at Starbucks Workers United events, and founding her own organization to support struggling workers. “I actually liked working at Starbucks. I also learned a lot that is useful now. I used to not be able to speak in front of a crowd at all! But you learn how to talk to people at the drive-through.”



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Gabrielle photographed in Salt Lake City, Utah, on August 24, 2022. (Courtesy of Johannes Hör)

We meet Gabrielle far from New York, on a slow afternoon in Salt Lake City, Utah. It's the end of her shift, and she is still carrying a green barista apron. No pedestrians are out, and cars wait in line patiently at the drive-through. One at a time, customers order at the terminal, are handed coffee through the open windows, and drive on.

"For many people my age, work here isn't a career job, but just a stepping stone in their life. But for a handful of people here, this is — well, not as good as it can get, but we don't have a lot of resources. Being able to use the benefits, rely on college tuition, medical care — I need that for my life. I'm thankful for the work."

The mother of two children speaks carefully, pausing between sentences. When asked about her decision to vote in favor of the union, she briefly hesitates:

It felt like, since the pandemic, everything has been going back to normal, but the company isn't. Staffing was bad before, but now it's insane. My kids had COVID earlier this year, so I was off work for about three weeks. I was able to get medical pay through the company for five days, but my kids were still sick and not allowed in day care.

During that time, I wasn't making any money and there was a threat of me losing this job and my benefits. Through the union, I learned about the Family and Medical Leave Act. So that was it for me. Since the divorce, I'm determined to have a better future, and I realized I can't just sit around and wait for my manager and the company to do something about that.



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A Starbucks store in Phoenix, Arizona, August 30, 2022. (Courtesy of Johannes Hör)

The entrance to a Starbucks drive-through in Phoenix, Arizona. The café has been closed to foot traffic since an armed robbery and a shooting in the parking lot earlier this year. Requests to hire security personnel trailed off in the company hierarchy and were eventually declined. This accelerated unionization, with workers discussing how to address safety issues in the bargaining demands. “Nobody wants to die at a Starbucks,” says one of the employees.



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**Signs indicating a strike in Boston, Massachusetts, August 31, 2022. (Courtesy of Johannes Hör)**

On Commonwealth Avenue in Boston, the Starbucks café entrance is boarded up: for almost two months, the baristas have been on strike. Near the glass storefront, where handwritten posters bear slogans and list demands, three strikers sit under a tent. At least one person needs to be picketing at all times, otherwise the camp will be cleared out.

Items scattered on a table hint toward the long shifts: board games, coloring books, plates, and a thermos flask. A piece of cardboard lists phone numbers of emergency contacts broken down by time of day. The employees have alleged unfair labor practices by management, such as a purposeful reduction of shift assignments for union-affiliated employees and the strategic substitution of baristas between stores.

Today is move-in day at nearby Boston University, and groups of students in search of coffee find the picket line instead. Some stay, take leaflets, and discuss. Most walk on: the next Starbucks is a five minute walk away.



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**Tyler photographed in Long Beach, California, on August 28, 2022. (Courtesy of Johannes Hör)**

I've worked at this store for three years now. Many of my coworkers aren't political, but come from underserved communities — they live here, and they've lived police brutality, racism, and being left behind economically. When the unionization happened in Buffalo, I just knew it needed to happen here. I knew I couldn't live like this; none of us can live like this. We were all trapped working a job that is miserable. And we had nowhere left to go, we were extremely frustrated.

Tyler's mood feels at odds with the sunny afternoon in Long Beach, California: he talks about pay inequality, quarterly bonuses for managers that easily exceed what a barista would make in three months, how little of the \$10,000 the store is generating daily for Starbucks arrives in workers' pockets, and how much of it is going to its CEOs.

At this point, the twenty-six-year-old knows labor activists all around the country and is well-connected on social media. He talks of friends at the Amazon union, the telephone giant Verizon, and the fast-food chain Chipotle whom he met on Twitter.

Everyone has their reasons for taking part in the new labor movement, but there's not one thing that's caused it. A lot of workers just hit a breaking point during the pandemic. That had a big effect on how people think on a day-to-day basis.

This country has been so fast at trying to move past the pandemic and pretend it doesn't exist anymore, and so was Starbucks. Our store never really closed, and the first day back for everyone was May 4, 2020. A three-dollar bonus ended within ten weeks of coming back. Everything that Starbucks had labeled as "worker-friendly" had been taken away two months into the pandemic. The stance was: "If you don't like to work, then leave." There were ten days of sick leave, state mandated. That was it. We had people working COVID positive, wearing a mask. And that was when a lot of people just couldn't go along anymore. Those who remained needed to work even harder.

But for Tyler, the origins of this frustration predate the pandemic:

In the last years, a new generation has been entering the workforce. And they have been told the world is going to end, that college won't get you anywhere, that you're stuck where you are. In this atmosphere, I started working for Starbucks, at nineteen.

For a while, it became such a trendy thing to quit your job. But many realized that quitting your job and getting another one isn't going to make things better. That really kick-started the drive to organize.

Nobody here I work with knew what unions were before we started the process at our store. There was this idea that this will never happen in fast food, never happen at Starbucks — that we were

unorganizable. Now it's happening, it's spreading like wildfire from coast to coast. It's impressive to see how far Starbucks is willing to go so they can prevent it.

In his perception, the potential to unionize is a built-in feature of the company's inclusive hiring practices: "We have this joke that comes up quite often: How did Starbucks not expect a unionization drive when all they ever hire are gay socialists?"



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Kit photographed in Salt Lake City, Utah, on August 24, 2022. (Courtesy of Johannes Hör)

"It's definitely a big American thing to have so little work-life separation. I've always tried to make it clear with employers that I'm not their friend, I'm not their family, that this is work. This also means that if there is a problem, it will be addressed, and it won't be addressed through extreme politeness — it needs to be fixed."

Out of all stores we visited, Kit and Gabrielle's café in Salt Lake City is the only one that is visibly

unionized: baristas are wearing union pins, and a bulletin board is bearing union posters.

It's probably a factor that we have been clear about knowing the laws and have called out infringements as soon as they happened. My coworkers would come up to me with questions and I'd need to say, "I don't know, I didn't go to school for any of this, I just work here!" But since nobody knew, I had to pick some of it up to answer these questions.

Kit pauses and continues speaking with a sly smile: "Also, I'm just mean, so I was fine with getting in confrontations with my manager."

When talking to Kit, one immediately senses a quiet assertiveness: she answers questions without digression and never interrupts her counterpart. We are sitting inside the café, surrounded by a handful of customers. The main work is taking place at the drive-through counter: a large screen lists orders, and red and green digits display average processing times.

Kit will take over Gabrielle's shift in a few minutes. She started to work at Starbucks over three years ago, also due to the trans-friendly medical coverage. "In general, insurance options aren't so great here compared to other employers, but I know a lot of trans people who would specifically seek this job out. Also, coffee shops tend to be quite liberal and queer, especially in Utah."

Still, the choice of career is not entirely pragmatic: "I love this job. I love being a barista, talking to people, and I'm passionate about coffee. I just don't like working for a corporation that doesn't treat us fairly. But if it weren't for the money, I would do this for a long time."

At this point, her future feels closely intertwined with that of the union: "It's a little scary because this is such a hopeful time. Before, union organizing was a little lonely, all the way out here in Utah. But I feel like we have really stepped it up recently. There's been a big focus on bargaining, trying to get Starbucks to the table, and we have stopped doing things store by store."

For her, the stakes are high:

Realistically, if things go well with Starbucks's and Amazon's negotiation and organization efforts, the chain of events that could be caused by that is huge. The company owners understand that, and they will stop at almost nothing to prevent this. And if they are able to squash this movement, I think people will not attempt something like it for a long time. So, a lot is riding on this, and we will see if we can be optimistic or not.



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Bill photographed in Phoenix, Arizona, on August 30, 2022. (Courtesy of Johannes Hör)

We meet Bill, who first told Laila about unions, in his hometown, a few blocks away from their former store. His dogs are panting in the dry Phoenix heat as we sit down in a quiet, shaded corner. Bill started to work for Starbucks in May 2020, after his event firm had experienced a wave of COVID-related cancellations. He recalls how hard it was to adjust to the fast-paced environment as a barista: “At that time, I didn’t have my hearing aids yet, and we were short-staffed during a shift. I was at the drive-through microphone, got more and more stressed. But over time I grew to really like the work, and I got better and better at it.”

A temporary solution turned into a career: both Bill and Laila applied to become shift supervisors.

“Here, I really started to notice the immense cost pressure everyone is under. My training for the new role was insufficient, and I saw unequal treatment everywhere,” he says. “So I wrote an email to the people in Buffalo, and we talked on Zoom. They recommended I just talk to my coworkers and listen. When I did that, it turned out that half the store was about to quit.”

After the initial steps toward unionization, the repercussions began, ultimately leading to Laila’s firing. “That’s when they really started to put pressure on us. We had complained about short staffing the whole time — in the week of the unionization vote, they hired seven new people. None of them were trained at our store, so I just had the names of seven people I didn’t know on the ballot list.”

Baristas were called for one-on-one conversations with management, who threatened that benefits

would be taken away if the store unionized. Many of his younger coworkers used the tuition fee program. The most long-lasting impact, however, was that coworkers quit amidst the pressure. Ultimately, so did Bill.

As a result, Bill is pessimistic about his former store: “They swapped out all of the people, which is a bit funny because on paper they now work for a unionized store.” This contrasts with his impressions of solidarity from the wider movement: since no Starbucks store has a union contract, there are also no member dues that could be used for organizing. But at Workers United, employees of other stores and sectors have voted to make their membership dues available. These resources finance a strike fund, and funds for union members who are fired or have their hours drastically cut.

Bill emphasizes the novelty of the movement: “This is all driven by the workers, which is unprecedented in the United States. And it’s huge. We’re calling on all those who work on hourly pay to organize. This is not a question of left or right to me.”

Today, Bill works part-time jobs at another coffee shop and as a substitute teacher. He is also building the worker support organization with Laila. “We have contact with Uber drivers, laborers in the cannabis industry, and at restaurant chains. We try to convey that it doesn’t help to have a one-on-one chat with your boss about your working conditions. We have tried that for a long time, all of us. Now is the time to organize.”

#### CONTRIBUTORS

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