

Michael's Story

Interview and story written with Jessie Tang



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Michael is a frontline worker who works at a grocery store.

Michael has been working in Chinese supermarkets for nine years. Like many working-class families, everyone's income has been affected by the pandemic. His father, who works in a bakery, has also seen reduced hours. In addition to a reduction in pay, they've had to pay out-of-pocket for masks, other personal protective equipment, disinfectant, and so on. As the primary breadwinner, and under the pressure of rising prices, Michael has no choice but to continue working at the supermarket.

For Michael, the most unbearable part of the pandemic has been the exhaustion and feeling of helplessness after a day of work. However, it's difficult to find sympathy for his struggles, so all he can do is persevere and encourage himself. "Practice good hygiene, wash your hands frequently, and persist!"

After the pandemic began, Michael felt

that people started looking at him a bit differently because he was Chinese. Recently, he has also had some minor conflicts with other employees as hours began to be reduced. When the manager eventually asked him to take leave, he was unwilling to provide Michael with a notice of unemployment. Ultimately, Michael was forced to quit during the midst of the pandemic, and look for a job elsewhere.

Michael believes that most of these workplace issues existed before the pandemic. Low pay and long hours are widespread in the industry, as is a lack of labour code adherence on issues like minimum wage and vacation pay. Unless government employees arrive on-site and investigate for themselves, they will remain ignorant of his reality. Though it is difficult to imagine in Canada, he was unable to receive the minimum mandated vacation pay, much less dental benefits for his job. The guarantees and protections under Canadian labour codes are out of reach

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for Michael. Many colleagues are treated unfairly by management because they lack the legal right to work in Canada. There is no protection against workplace injury, no holiday pay, and no overtime pay. Despite this, Michael's colleagues continue to work, silently contributing to Canada's economy through their

blood, sweat, and tears. He hopes that the Canadian government will one day recognize their efforts and provide them with a stable immigration status.

Before working at a supermarket, Michael spent half a year working as a technician, helping install air conditioning, electricity, water, and gas in residential and commercial properties. As a newcomer in the industry, the pay was low, and he had a hard time maintaining living expenses after taxes, so he soon returned to working in supermarkets.

Before immigrating, I was under the impression that it would be easy to make a lot of money in the United States or Canada, says Michael, but after arriving, it seems like the life of an immigrant is spent scrounging for enough to eat. For immigrants like him who don't speak English and don't have diplomas or technical skills, the only work available is in supermarkets, restaurants, and factories. These jobs don't require anything more than two hands, two legs, and a tolerance for hardship.

Michael feels that the government acted appropriately in response to the pandemic, but the lion's share of the benefits went to employers. Policies were designed to support business owners first, and simply meet the survival needs of the working class. The pandemic and lockdown have made everyone

bored and stressed out of their minds. This summer, Michael looks forward to meeting people in parks and in person, as well as organizing events to unite the community.