

GINIA BELLAFANTE | BIG CITY

# Baristas Push Starbucks, And a New York Agency, To Uphold a Labor Law

FOR MORE THAN a year, Felix Santiago has worked as a barista at a Starbucks near Times Square, and for about half that time he loved it. It was easy to swap shifts, easy to pick up new ones, easy to get along with supervisors who were largely accommodating. “The first six months were absolutely great,” Mr. Santiago told me recently. His opinion changed when his hours were cut in October and then again in January.

Overall they had fallen from roughly 31 hours a week to just under 24, a drop of nearly 25 percent, and the reduction in pay was harshly felt. His rent, \$1,000 a month, for a room in a Bronx apartment, was no longer manageable, he said, so he began bouncing around from sofa to sofa, from friend’s place to friend’s place. This is how homelessness so often begins.

In early December, about three weeks after Mr. Santiago, who still works at Starbucks, filed an official complaint with the city helped by Local 32BJ of the Service Employees International Union, several other Starbucks workers with similar grievances about the company’s inconsistent approach to scheduling were invited to sit down with Mayor Eric Adams at City Hall. A few days later, the mayor posted pictures from the meeting on social media demonstrating his support. “I don’t have to tell you that Starbucks workers get our city moving every morning,” he wrote. “Their city stands with them in their push for fair conditions and workers’ rights.”

But what did that mean in practice? Since last February, the Department of Consumer and Worker Protection, the city agency entrusted with maintaining those rights, has received 76 complaints filed from employees at 56 Starbucks branches claiming that the company has violated the city’s Fair Workweek Law over and over again. Taken together, the complaints argue that Starbucks did not provide them with regular schedules, that hours were cut without reasonable explanation and that the company failed to post open shifts for employees who wanted them, choosing

EMAIL [bigcity@nytimes.com](mailto:bigcity@nytimes.com); follow [Ginia Bellafante on X: @GiniaNYT](https://twitter.com/GiniaNYT)

to hire new workers instead.

Another barista, Jordan Roseman, who has been working at a Starbucks in the financial district for three years, has watched his hours drop from 20 to 15 and sometimes even 10, he told me, which has made it harder to help pay rent, utilities and other expenses for the apartment he shares with his father.

When Mr. Roseman applied to the Starbucks College Achievement Plan, an on-line degree program offered through Arizona State University and a signature benefit of his employment, he found that he did not work enough hours to be eligible. “It was a gut punch,” he said. “If my hours hadn’t been cut, I would have 100 percent qualified.” He filed an initial complaint in August and is considering filing a second.

Andrew Trull, a spokesman for Starbucks, maintained that the company took compliance very seriously. “We make every effort and have invested significant resources to ensure partner scheduling practices are in alignment with New York City’s Fair Workweek and Just Cause ordinances,” he wrote in an email.

Julie Menin, who ran the Department of Consumer and Worker Protection during the early years of the de Blasio administration and is now the chairwoman of the City Council committee related to these issues, believes that Starbucks has not worked hard enough to align itself with these mandates. But no less worrisome to her is the city’s slow pace of response, with complaints like Mr. Santiago’s languishing with the worker protection agency for months.

“The concern I have is the sheer number and nature of complaints and the number of stores involved,” she said. “You have a corporate actor with pervasive violations. If ever there was a case that warranted citywide and aggressive action, it is Starbucks.”

In a statement, Michael Lanza, a spokesman for the Department of Consumer and Worker Protection, said that the office was “committed to protecting workers and holding employers accountable for flouting our city’s laws” but that it



Felix Santiago, left, and Jordan Roseman work as baristas at Starbucks stores in New York City. They are among the employees who claim that the company is violating the city’s Fair Workweek Law.

NATALIE KEYSAR FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

could not discuss ongoing investigations, which vary in “scope and complexity.”

Even as inequality has remained a hallmark of life in New York, the city has stood at the vanguard of progressive workplace legislation, filling in the gaps left by federal lawmaking and delivering what many other cities do not. Established in 2017 and expanded four years later, the Fair Workweek Law is meant to safeguard fast-food workers from various forms of corporate exploitation by insisting that they receive predictable schedules and the opportunity to work more hours if they

**Complaints about inconsistent schedules, reduced hours and slow responses by the city’s guardians of workers.**

would like them and by prohibiting more than a 15 percent reduction in hours without just cause or a legitimate economic reason. Starbucks’s net income totaled more than \$4 billion in 2023, a 26 percent increase over the previous year.

Once simply the Department of Consumer Affairs, the agency saw its mission broadened to include worker protections in 2016 for the purpose of enhancing “the daily economic lives of New Yorkers to create thriving communities.” There have been major successes, the most recent of which was announced last month: a settlement with six companies, including Taco Bell, White Castle and Domino’s Pizza, for violations that affected more than 3,500 workers. The companies were forced to pay a combined \$2.7 million in restitution and \$343,000 in penalties.

Perhaps because Starbucks emerged out of Seattle in the 1970s as an early avatar of a new corporate counterculture, it has been a lightning rod in the way that Taco Bell, for instance, has not — a symbol of gentrification run amok, of liberal consumer excess, of bougie hypocrisy.

It may not matter what a city agency — even a very august and meaningful one — will or won’t do in the face of a sweeping unionization effort and prospective boycotts. Last week, students at New York University brought a petition to the president demanding that the school end its licensing agreement with Starbucks. Similar petitions were getting passed around at 25 other college campuses around the country during a week when Workers United, the Starbucks union, organized a record 21 stores in a single day. By that point, it had already won victories in 386 locations.

## READER COMMENTS

### Not a Priest, but Devoutly In Charge at Fordham

Readers responded by letter and at [nytimes.com](https://nytimes.com) to David Waldstein’s article on Jan. 28 about Tania Tetlow, the first woman and first layperson to lead the Jesuit university. Comments have been edited.

I SERVE AS THE PRESIDENT of Fordham’s Graduate Student Council, and I can assure you that had Fordham’s labor unions, faculty and undergraduate groups been thoroughly consulted, they would have revealed Tania Tetlow to be a divisive figure.

Fordham’s most cherished value is *cura personalis* — care of the whole person, which is a call to treat all members of our community with dignity and ensure their well-being. Tetlow has instead silenced student organizers and insisted on Fordham’s need to bind survivors of harassment and discrimination to silence through nondisclosure agreements. She has also hiked undergraduate tuition, and has cut \$9 million of funding for teaching and research while increasing administrative budgets by \$15 million, even though a Jesuit education is supposed to strive for excellence in research and teaching.

As an international student, instructor and student leader at Fordham, I do not feel welcomed or safe under Tetlow’s leadership.

MARIA G. HURTARTE LEON, NEW YORK

I’M A 1967 GRADUATE of Fordham College as well as one who spent his career in higher education. Fordham could not have made a better choice for its president. I am extremely proud of both Dr. Tetlow and my alma mater. She will lead Fordham to continued excellence.

MICHAEL F. MIDDAGH, WILMINGTON, DEL.

GREAT ARTICLE! It absolutely supports my experience as a mom to Fordham freshman. When I dropped my daughter off, we ran into President Tetlow, and she was lovely — warm, engaging, welcoming and perfect for a nervous mom dropping her only daughter far away from home! I continue to be impressed with this school and feel so grateful for its Jesuit value of *cura personalis*. In just one semester, my daughter has experienced the academic rigor, caring professors and welcoming friends that I hoped she would.

ELIZABETH HAYES, CHICAGO

CONGRATULATIONS TO THE BOARD, faculty, staff and students at Fordham. This new change shows what an open-minded stimulating, intellectual university Fordham is!

DOLLY PATTERSON, REDWOOD CITY, CALIF.



Tania Tetlow, who has headed Fordham since July 2022, says that “being a university president is a tough job on a good day.”

### Comedians Are Finding The Funny in a Heated Topic

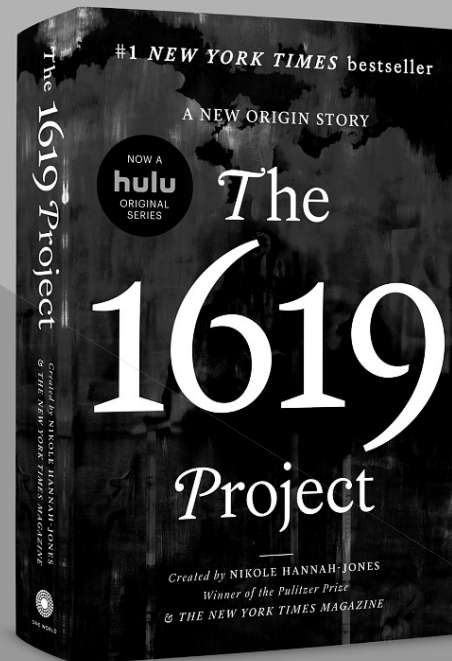
A reader also responded by letter to Hilary Howard’s Feb. 11 article on how comics are increasingly turning their attention to the climate crisis.

IS THERE SUCH A THING as a topic that should be “off limits”? Schopenhauer knew all truth must pass through three stages: 1. First it is ridiculed. 2. Then it is resisted. 3. Then it is accepted as self-evident. Given that each stage is inevitable, we might as well get the ridicule over and done with as completely as we can. The That’s Not Funny Crowd, the latest self-appointed incarnation of the Society for the Preservation of Decency and Morality, prefers to shut down everything they disagree with. That is more dangerous than the ridicule we fear, as it only postpones acceptance. Comedians are on our side whether they intend to be or not. Those with us lampoon our beliefs of “how things should be.” Those who seem to oppose us uncover those same prejudices. When thoughts that are “not allowed” are driven underground, they silently fester and become malignant, erupting in the violence that accompanies resistance when we’ve tried to bypass Step 1. Comedy is healing, but only if we let it be, rather than direct it to be. The marker indicating your movement has succeeded is that it is able to laugh at itself, which only comes through (self-) acceptance.

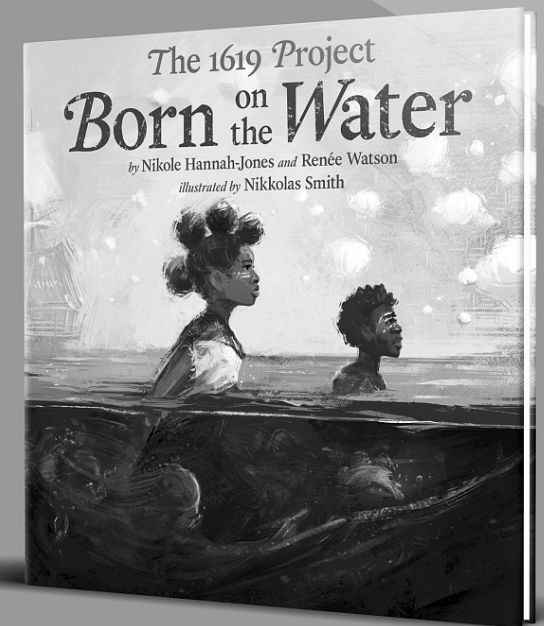
TIM McNERNEY, SHUTESBURY, MASS.

The writer is a stand-up comic who also works with start-up electric vehicle companies.

TO UNDERSTAND THE PRESENT, WE MUST CLEARLY SEE THE PAST.



A dramatic expansion of a groundbreaking work of journalism, this collection of essays, poetry, and works of fiction offers a profoundly revealing vision of the American past and present—now a limited Hulu series.



A lyrical children’s book tells the story of the arrival of the first enslaved Africans in 1619 and the heroic role their descendants played in building the United States.

AVAILABLE EVERYWHERE BOOKS AND AUDIOBOOKS ARE SOLD.

1619books.com

