2019 ANNUAL REPORT
Retail Workers’ Lives Are Better Because You Care
Executive Summary

Since 2014, the Center for Frontline Retail (CFR) has actively engaged retail workers, labor leaders, employers, and community leaders to create community and support structures, and raise standards of employment for current and future retail workers. CFR utilizes a service-to-organizing model, providing workers with essential services not provided by employers, including sector skills training, know-your-rights and popular education, and connections to employment opportunities. Through those services, CFR develops workers’ leadership skills and connects them to our community of workers advocating for fair and safe employment in their stores and the retail sector at large. To accomplish this, CFR works in three areas, known as CFR’s pillars.

**Civic Engagement and Organizing**
- Support workers in developing the tools and resources they need to create systematic change in their stores and the industry as a whole.

**Essential Services**
- Assist retail workers in finding employment opportunities while providing education in sector-skills and professional development to support workers in finding new employment and advancing along retail career pathways.

**Research**
- Provide stakeholders with information on changes in the retail workplace that affects the retail worker.

For CFR, 2019 was a building year. The organization’s new executive director, Brian Fuss, P.h.D. worked with the board of directors, staff, and allies to set the foundation for the work during the next three years. CFR created a strategic plan to guide the organization’s next three years of growth, building out goals for our three pillars of work and organizational growth.

CFR also strengthened our programs, developed a new training, and advocated for improved working conditions for all workers. We continued to offer education and support for retail workers and job seekers, and provided retail skills trainings to several community organizations across the city. CFR conducted Next Level Retail hiring clinics in conjunction with Workforce1 Career Centers in Brooklyn and Queens, for whom we are a top-performing partner. We rallied with our members for new legislation, to defend our rights, and to celebrate our communities. We held monthly gatherings with community members and partners to discuss changes in the sector, intersectional learnings across our communities, and workers’ movements for change.
Due to the broader political climate, CFR regrettably lost one of our major programming areas. The Trump administration cut funding for navigator programs across the country, and CFR lost funding for our Health Care Access Program (HCAP) through the Community Service Society of New York, which provided retail workers health insurance education and enrollment. In this last year alone from January through April 2019, HCAP served 511 New Yorkers. CFR is committed to continuing to fight for retail workers’ health and safety, and is mobilizing our members to support Health Care for All New York.

To support our important work, CFR received renewed funding from the Consortium for Worker Education, the Mertz Gilmore Foundation, and the New York Women’s Foundation. We received new funding from the Edward and Ellen Roche Relief Fund. In 2019, CFR was awarded funding to provide several courses — Customer Service, Visual Merchandising, and Next Level Retail — to over 1,600 unemployed and underemployed workers from the New York State Department of Labor.

CFR is excited to build out our work and to continue to build the power of New York City’s retail workers over the years to come. We hope you stay connected to CFR as we move forward into the next phase of organizational development.
2019 Highlights

**Essential Services**

- Provided sector-skills training embedded with education about their rights and health and safety standards to 268 new and seasoned professionals
- Provided 61 workers and job seekers with education in job search navigation, career pathways in retail, and job search skills including resume writing and interviewing
- Connected 1,696 job seekers with employment opportunities in the retail and service sectors
- Provided health care education and enrollment services to 511 New Yorkers

**Civic Engagement and Organizing**

- Mobilized members to attend seven rallies, actions, and conferences in support of paid personal time, healthcare for all, queer and trans rights, and worker campaigns
- Elevated worker stories of working on the frontlines in retail through consistent social media engagement and interviews with workers
- Hosted monthly gatherings, including a holiday party, bringing together 20–40 community members, partners, and allies each month to address workers’ issues and provide know-your-rights workshops

**Research**

- Conducted focus groups to determine the issues most prevalent in the retail industry for workers
Essential Services

Workers initially join CFR’s community when accessing our essential services. Job seekers and current retail workers alike seeking new employment attend a Next Level Retail (NLR) hiring clinic, and are recruited for retail sector skills trainings such as Customer Service and Visual Merchandising. At these trainings, workers additionally learn about their rights as workers and how to be an agent of change.

In 2019, CFR launched a new class, the Retail Practical Lab (RPL), a hands-on lab recreating the retail environment to give participants practical experience in dealing with customers, co-workers, and managers. Participants develop their confidence on the retail sales floor, practice customer service and professional skills, and learn to self-evaluate their skills to improve at work.

CFR analyzed data from participants’ intake forms for NLR and other sector-skill trainings. These intake forms were designed by two major funders, the Consortium for Worker Education and the New York State Department of Labor. While this data is not fully comprehensive, it provides a snapshot of the communities that we work with, and which retail workers are in need of CFR’s services and community organizing.

CFR’s participants are representative of the New York City retail workforce at large. Women make up a slight majority of CFR’s participants, as they do of low-wage workers as a whole. Retail jobs attract workers at all stages of life, many of whom are supporting their families with these jobs. More participants were 22 years of age than any other age, with the average participant being 31 years old; in 2019, the oldest participant was 78 years old and the youngest was 16 years old. Our services attract diverse immigrant communities. Of the 19% of participants who immigrated to the United States, the majority were born in countries in Africa, the Caribbean, Latin America, and South Asia (see the map below).
CFR’s participants’ racial and ethnic make-up aligns with the demographics of the retail workforce at large, which is disproportionately made up of Black women and women of color. A majority of our participants (almost 56%) self-identified as Black or African-American. 19% of participants were Latinx or Hispanic.

Many frontline retail workers are making the minimum wage of $15 an hour and working erratic part-time hours. Major retailers have decreased hours even while making record profits. As such, most NLR participants were unemployed or underemployed, needing financial assistance or other resources to live comfortably. Of the participants who reported on their employment status, a majority reported being unemployed, with the majority having been unemployed for one to three months. For the participants that were employed, the majority reported working part-time.
Of the nearly 400 participants who reported receiving assistance, the majority reported receiving SNAP benefits, with most households making only $0–15,000 a year, far under the $16,248 maximum yearly income for a single person household to receive SNAP benefits.
Many people believe that frontline retail workers do not have a degree or were unable to finish high school. CFR found that 56.3% of participants in the Next Level Retail clinics had some higher education experience, with the majority having received some non-specified higher education.

![Pie chart showing education levels: 56.3% have some higher education, 33.8% have high school, 9.9% have less than high school.]

![Bar chart showing higher education levels: 32.34% have unspecified higher education, 9.95% have associate degree, 9.83% have bachelor degree, 1.99% have certificate, 0.68% have master degree, 0.06% have PhD.]
Throughout 2019, CFR continued to advocate with our retail worker leaders for more equitable policies in the workplace. Workers in the CFR community participated in monthly membership gatherings at which they discussed issues facing the modern retail worker, discussed strategy for ongoing retail campaigns for workplace justice, and learned about advocating for their rights as workers, New Yorkers, and immigrants.

Workers also took part in surveys, pilot classes, and other activities that supported building out our programming and new classes for the year, and ensuring those programs prepared participants to join us and help lead CFR’s community organizing.

We mobilized our members to participate in various actions, rallies, and celebrations, including: rallying at City Hall in May to urge lawmakers to pass paid personal time for all New York City workers; marching in World Pride in June; marching in the Labor Day Parade in September; rallying to protect queer and trans workers under Title VII in Washington, D.C.; speaking at a City Council hearing on Health Care for All in October; rallying with the L.A. Garment Worker Center for their #PayUpRoss in October, and speaking on the issues affecting NYC retail workers; and celebrating the year’s successes at our annual holiday gathering in December. Through their participation, our community members shone a light on the issues facing our communities, and the importance of their labor and progressive movements in New York City.
In 2019, CFR began developing plans to conduct research within the next three years on two major issues affecting retail workers, automation and workers’ health. CFR held focus groups and one-on-one interviews with community members to learn about their experiences with automation in retail, both as workers and as customers.

CFR continued to promote our 2017 report, *Pathways to Success*, about the need for comprehensive and free training for frontline workers. Our research showed that while career ladders exist in retail, workers have trouble climbing those ladders and are expected to take on additional responsibilities without a change in title, pay or additional training. Expanding access to quality training is a key mechanism to increase longevity, de-segregate the workforce, and build a career ladder for retail workers.
2019 Finances

CFR’s finances were stable in 2019. Local foundations, including the Mertz Gilmore Foundation and New York Women’s Foundation, have been tremendously supportive of our work throughout the years. In 2019, CFR was grateful to receive new funding from the Edward and Ellen Roche Relief Fund.

CFR subcontracted with the Consortium for Worker Education to provide health care navigation services and training and education services respectively. CFR also received funding from the New York State Department of Labor through the Regional Economic Development Council’s Unemployed Worker Training fund to provide sector-skill trainings to unemployed and underemployed New Yorkers.

CFR was also grateful to receive donations from Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) Local 1102 and several leaders at RWDSU, as well as from several valued individual donors, including CFR’s Board of Directors. We will continue to grow our individual donor base in the upcoming year.

CFR provided training to a variety of community-based organizations, and aims to further build out a fee-for-service structure to become an even stronger partner to these organizations.
Due to federal funding cuts to health care navigation programs across the country, CFR unfortunately lost funding for our Health Care Access Program through the Community Service Society of New York in April 2019.

The majority of CFR’s funding goes towards program expenses, including supplies, recruitment, phone bills, maintenance of our website which invites workers to our office and educates them about our programs and their rights, and the salaries of the staff members who run our programs and enable the organization to function. Eight percent of CFR’s revenue goes to former fiscal sponsor Make the Road New York (MRNY); while CFR intends to fully transition out of the fiscal sponsorship structure in 2020, MRNY currently holds CFR’s finances and supports managing payroll.
CFR’s Board of Directors and Supporters

CFR is governed by a Board of Directors. Board Chair Paulette Amedo is a retired union leader. Magdalena Barbosa, an employment attorney, serves as Secretary of the Board. Lawrence Eisenberg, a professor and licensed social worker, serves as the Board Treasurer. Gail Rogers is a retired union leader.

CFR’s Board of Directors saw some transitions in 2019. Long-time board members Lorelei Salas, LaDonna Lusher, and Onieka O’Kieffe rotated off the board. CFR thanks them for their years of service to the organization.

CFR is grateful to the following supporters:

- Mertz Gilmore Foundation
- New York Women’s Foundation
- Edward and Ellen Roche Relief Fund
- Consortium for Worker Education
- Community Service Society of New York
- New York State Department of Labor
- Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU)
- Local 1102 of the RWDSU
- New England Joint Board
2020–2023 Strategic Goals

Over the course of 2019, CFR’s executive director worked with the staff and Board of Directors to develop the 2020–2023 Strategic Plan. Over the course of the next three years, CFR will work on 10 goals related to our three pillars and our general operations:

**Community Organizing and Engagement**
1. Members take on well-defined leadership roles that contribute to the success of the organization.
2. Monitor and act on any local and state legislation that will affect retail workers or the retail industry.

**Essential Services**
3. Become the one-stop resource for retail workers seeking essential workforce development and services that help workers thrive.
4. Remain active in the workforce development community, including strengthening relationships with retail employers.

**Research**
5. Conduct at least two research projects related to retail workers.
6. Use data to improve the organization’s programming.

**Organization**
7. Develop internal and external communication that is effective, transparent, consistent, open, and honest for all stakeholders.
8. Require CFR to benefit from a diverse staff, Board of Directors, contractors, and volunteers who are dedicated to upholding the values of equity and inclusiveness.
9. Increase resources by 2% each year via diverse funding streams.
10. Become an independent organization.

The full Strategic Plan can be found on our website. We are excited to continue to grow as an organization and to become even stronger advocates for industry change alongside our community of retail workers.