

Seattle COVID-19 Oral History Project

How has the COVID-19 pandemic changed the everyday lives and outlook of local frontline workers?

Specifically, what are their experiences around such themes as occupational health and safety, government and civil society, race and racism, technology, and specific occupations/industries?

Wendi Zhou, University of Washington

Faculty Mentor: Prof. Kim England, Geography, Harry Bridges Endowed Chair of Labor Studies

Research funded by the UW Northwest Center for Occupational Health & Safety and the Mary Gates Endowment for Students

Research Team and Methodology

- 11 undergraduate oral history interns, training by the UW Libraries Labor Archives of Washington (LAW)
- Interns speak eight languages (English, Mandarin, Spanish, Vietnamese, Russian, German, French, and Khmer)
- Interviews started at the end of March 2021 and are still in progress
 - Goal of at least 12 interviews completed and transcribed
 - Eight interviews completed so far, transcription currently in progress
- Collaborators/partners include the Harry Bridges Center for Labor Studies, Asian and Pacific American Labor Alliance (APALA) Seattle, UNITE HERE Local 8, and Service Employees International Union (SEIU) 1199NW

Interview Questions

Co-developed with stakeholder groups (LAW and the partners from local labor organizations)

Sample questions

1. Can you walk me through a typical day in your life during the pandemic, from the time you wake up to the time you go to sleep?
2. Have you received hazard pay as result of the pandemic? If so when/how much and has it continued?
3. How has the pandemic changed your social life? Have you had any online or socially distanced social events?
4. How has childcare impacted your ability to work? How has childcare impacted your self-care?
5. Can you reflect on any positive experiences you have had during the pandemic?

Results

- Interviews are intended to situate narrators within the totality of everyday life – including family and friends, mental health, etc.
- I will be addressing three prominent themes that emerged from the interviews:
 - Access to technology and the digital divide
 - Labor unions and organizing
 - Race and racism
- Ostensibly about work but cannot be entirely disconnected from life outside of work as well

Results – 1. Access to Technology & the Digital Divide

- “[I] try not use the internet unless I have a meeting or workshop. . . . [A]nd in the afternoon if I have meetings my kids wait for me while I do it or they [use the internet] before [my meetings]. And like that we take turns between us” – **Teresa***, formerly employed at a restaurant chain

* Names have been changed to protect identity

Results – 1. Access to Technology & the Digital Divide

- “I feel lucky that I can navigate [digital technology], but I have noticed how hard it is for my family...my parents; I had to be there to help them get on the family group calls. That's how like, hard it was for them. And they have smartphones, they have tablets, and they still couldn't figure it out. And so, I've definitely seen that generation difference of . . . being able to use technology, and having to shift to more technology.” – **Nicole***, barista

* Names have been changed to protect identity

Results – 2. Labor Unions & Organizing

- “How they [narrator’s employer] decided health and safety measures during this pandemic left people at risk. So our union had to take action. And I mean WFSE [Washington Federation of State Employees] came through and we bought the plexiglass. We bought masks. We took action and demanded, demanded, right, that we get the PPE that we needed and those were hard fought battles.” – **Nora***, healthcare worker

* Names have been changed to protect identity

Results – 2. Labor Unions & Organizing

- “I know that's been challenging, a lot of what ended up being effective for the union wasn't necessarily collective bargaining, but pressure on local governments to do things and to have the city or the county or the state step in and do things. The Plexiglas barriers . . . was something that kind of came from UFCW [United Food and Commercial Workers], working with . . . local and . . . state governments . . . to implement those standards and get Plexiglas installed in check stands.” – **Ted***, former bartender and current grocery worker

* Names have been changed to protect identity

Results – 2. Labor Unions & Organizing

- “Well, I think that our union has been important. Important, because even when conversations have not been very satisfactory, or conversations have not led to the kind of agreement that faculty prefer, at least administration feels obligated to have that conversation. And I think in a non-union environment it's ‘Good luck to the individual,’ because you're truly on your own.” – **Amy**^{*}, community college instructor and labor organizer

^{*} Names have been changed to protect identity

Results – 3. Race & Racism

- “Just recently, you know, the Asian Hate has been a big topic, and I actually am experiencing- maybe I'm just now realizing it, but I . . . feel like some of the comments that are addressed to me are actually kind of racist. And I guess I'm just now recognizing that because of people's behaviors.”
– **Ana***, grocery worker

* Names have been changed to protect identity

Results – 3. Race & Racism

- “I think with the recent, um, anti-Asian attacks . . . it’s also made me feel more concerned about doing anything by myself, because if I do, am I somehow . . . taking a risk that is unnecessary? . . . [I] definitely know other people [who have personally experienced anti-Asian hate] from APALA’s [Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance] Seattle chapter. . . . People have talked about, um, just getting yelled at on the street “ – **Amy***, community college instructor and labor organizer

* Names have been changed to protect identity

Results – 3. Race & Racism

- “When we go out to the park, we tend to see that American [white] people are the ones who don’t protect themselves, they don’t wear masks...we saw that on the news were saying that was the Hispanic population that were propagating the virus the most because they were the highest cases of contracting the virus because they didn’t protect themselves. But when we went outside, we saw that they [white people] were the ones not wearing any masks...it was unfair for them [the news] to blame us when it was the Americans [white people].” “ – **Teresa***, formerly employed at a restaurant chain

* Names have been changed to protect identity

Results

- Three key themes: Technology, labor organizing, and race/racism – most narrators addressed them
- Other important lessons we can learn from the interviews:
 - The complexity of workers' lives in a pandemic – if their jobs allowed online work, individuals adapted at different rates
 - Balancing work and family
 - Unions and local labor organizations were important to workers in often unexpected ways – specifically, in stepping in to provide a basic level of safety (via PPE, plexiglass, etc.) for workers on the job
 - Significant connections between work in a pandemic and the experience of racism
 - Feeling resentful about persistent portrayals of BIPOC groups not taking safety precautions
 - Anti-Asian hate
- I am very grateful that the narrators took the time to share their stories

Acknowledgements & Contributors

UW Harry Bridges Center for Labor Studies

- Kim England
- Yasmin Ahmed

UW Libraries – Labor Archives of Washington

- Conor Casey
- Diana Rocha

Community Partners

- Eunice How, UNITE HERE Local 8 and APALA Seattle
- Ligaya Domingo, SEIU 1199 NW
- Tracy Lai, APALA Seattle and AFT Seattle Local 1789

SCOHP Narrators/Interviewees

SCOHP Oral History Interns

- Marshall Bender
- Liam Collins
- Jakar Delacruz
- Jasmine Fernandez
- Stephanie Huerta-Ramirez
- Andrew Jawort
- Nancy Mendoza-Ruiz
- Ella Munizza
- Anna Nguyen
- Ammara Touch
- Ashley Villanueva