



MONEY

McDonald's workers sue fast food chain claiming they face 'daily risk of violence at work'

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Weeks after McDonald's fired former CEO Steve Easterbrook for having a relationship with an employee, 17 Chicago-area workers are suing the fast-food giant over what they call a "citywide and nationwide pattern" of violence.

The lawsuit filed Thursday in Illinois state court claims corporate officials have chosen profit over workers' safety, alleging that employees "face a daily risk of violence while at work" and McDonald's has been "negligent in failing to protect workers from this risk."

The suit points to high rates of 911 calls from Chicago McDonald's restaurants with more than 20 calls a day.

"The plaintiffs are pursuing this case to address the systemic problem of violence affecting them and their co-workers every day," Danny Rosenthal, the lead attorney in the lawsuit, said in a call announcing the lawsuit Thursday.

Incidents outlined in the legal complaint include a customer who jumped over the counter and pulled a gun on workers, a customer beating an employee over the head and back with a heavy wet-floor sign, and in another instance, a customer urinating on a worker.

McDonald's, whose employee training program includes guidance on how to mitigate workplace violence, said in a statement that it "takes seriously its responsibility to provide and foster a safe working environment for our employees, and along with our franchisees, continue to make investments in training programs that uphold safe environments for customers and crew members. In addition to training, McDonald's maintains stringent policies against violence in our restaurants."

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Sonia Acuña, a McDonald's worker and plaintiff in the suit, disagrees.

Acuña said that police found a dead body in her store's bathroom.

"McDonald's never provided any safety training or offered any support for the trauma I've suffered," she said in a press release. "We shouldn't have to put ourselves in harm's way just to support our families. That's why we're suing McDonald's today – because it's life or death for us."

With more than 90% of McDonald's locations franchise-owned, franchisees were also the focus of the suit. But the McDonald's corporation bears final responsibility because it owns the buildings and sets the standards for store design and training, Rosenthal says.

"The plaintiffs' experiences of violence can be traced back to decisions made at the highest levels of the corporation," he said, noting a split counter format dubbed "Experience of the Future" that allows customers to easily access the kitchen and work area at many locations.

"McDonald's has utterly failed to design stores that minimize the chance for violence," Rosenthal said, adding that conversions to the new counter format should stop until security concerns are addressed. "McDonald's has failed to provide even basic training that would help workers minimize conflict or respond appropriately when it occurs."

Many of the lawsuit's claims were mentioned in a May 2019 report from the National Employment Law Project, which said "McDonald's is failing in its legal duty to provide employees a safe work environment."

The report asserted that McDonald's long hours of operations "put thousands of workers at risk due to the high levels of violence associated with late-night retail" and found more than 720 violent incidents were covered by news media in a three-year period.

McDonald's isn't the only fast-food chain with violent incidents.

Earlier this month, two Maryland men got into a fight over a Popeyes chicken sandwich and one of them was stabbed to death.

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