

# Grocery workers were on the front lines of the pandemic — so why so many still unvaccinated?

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Since the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic last year, almost 500 retail and meatpacking workers have died from Covid-19, according to the United Food and Commercial Workers International labor union. Yet many workers whose colleagues got sick and even died during the depths of the pandemic are rejecting their employers' pushes to get vaccinated.

From Walmart to the meat giant Tyson Foods, an increasing number of companies have rolled out vaccination mandates for corporate staff members or all employees. But efforts to encourage workers to get vaccinated — and recent vaccination mandates — have caused rifts and pushback among workers, leading some companies to stop short of requiring vaccinations for front-line staffers.

"If McDonald's requires the vaccine, I would be looking for employment elsewhere," said Kenya Ahl, a department manager at a corporate-owned McDonald's restaurant in Paynesville, Minnesota. McDonald's announced in an internal memo this month that office workers will be [required](#) to show proof of vaccination before they return to work Oct. 11. However, the rule does not apply to restaurant staff members. McDonald's did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

"That is not something I want to participate in and put in my body," Ahl said.

Resistance to vaccinations and to potential mandates remains nearly two

years into a pandemic that has ravaged the retail and grocery industry. Because of their heightened exposure to the public, the risk of death from the virus among food workers increased by 39 percent and by 18 percent among retail workers, compared to pre-pandemic levels, [according](#) to a University of California San Francisco study published in January. The virus increased the risk of death among nonessential workers by 11 percent.

Ahl, who has worked at McDonald's for two years, said the company posted signs in the break room encouraging workers to get vaccinated. A vaccination reminder also pops up every time an employee logs on to the computers, she said. The company has provided webinars and reading materials to educate workers about the vaccines, along with four hours' paid time off to get vaccinated.

Even though [the Food and Drug Administration fully approved the Pfizer-BioNTech two-dose vaccine on Aug. 23](#), Ahl refuses to get the shots.

"Common sense tells me that this vaccine hasn't been out long enough to have any study or background on the shot," she said, adding that a recent Facebook debate she read suggested that the vaccine could contain the live virus. The vaccine does not contain any live virus, [according](#) to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Regardless, "it doesn't make me comfortable," Ahl said.

Until recently, employers have depended on cash incentives, bonuses, gift certificates and paid time off to overcome hesitancy about the vaccines, said Devjani Mishra, a lawyer with Littler Mendelson, a global employment and labor law firm representing management.

Kroger employees get \$100 bonuses with proof of vaccination, and vaccinated Publix employees get \$125 gift cards. Walmart recently doubled its cash incentive from \$75 to \$150. But bonuses and gift cards have gone

only so far — and with full FDA approval of the Pfizer vaccine, employers are considering more aggressive measures, Mishra said.

“These are small things that move things along without making it a requirement of employment,” she said. “But some employers who have tried these measures to bring up vaccination numbers have reached a point where they are no longer playing around with incentives and they are ready to make the call” about mandates.

About 63 percent of employers [surveyed](#) by the firm in August reported that they plan to continue to encourage vaccinations. But nearly half also said they are “strongly considering” mandates because of [the rise in cases fueled by the delta variant](#).

As long as the vaccines are equally available to all workers, private employers have a right to mandate vaccinations, except in Montana, which [banned](#) private companies from requiring vaccination as a condition of employment, Mishra said. Even with the law behind them, employers are balancing concerns about damaging workplace culture with mandates and potential losses of employees who might be driven away by such policies, she said.

“If 50 percent of the workforce or more is not vaccinated, how do you say to that 50 percent, ‘You have to go do something or you don't have a job?’” she said. “It is not guaranteed that you can replace them with someone in the community who is vaccinated.”

As workers debate whether to get vaccinated, labor unions representing grocery, retail and food production workers have mostly stayed mum on the question of mandates.

United for Respect, a nonprofit organization that focuses on workers' rights,

said the group has not taken a position. Chelsea Connor, a spokesperson for the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union, declined to comment; the union's president, Stuart Appelbaum, [told](#) The New York Times this month that employers should negotiate any requirements with workers and expand pandemic benefits, such as paid sick time. United Food and Commercial Workers International President Marc Perrone said in response to Tyson Foods' [recent](#) vaccination mandate that the union will meet with the company to "ensure that the rights of these workers are protected and this policy is fairly implemented."

Much of the skepticism stems from distrust of the government and the vaccines' potential impacts on workers' health, along with doubts about the pandemic itself, Appelbaum [told](#) The Wall Street Journal this month, before the FDA approved Pfizer's vaccine.

Spencer Dillenbeck, who has worked at a Target store in San Diego for five years, said he reluctantly got vaccinated so he could work without a mask during the brief few months the company lifted its mask mandate. But he is still skeptical about widespread vaccinations, saying he believes the virus has become less of a threat with death rates down.

"I could see us doing [a vaccine mandate] if people were dying like crazy," said Dillenbeck, who said he has turned for virus information to sources like Joe Rogan's podcast and Tim Pool's YouTube channel, both of which have come under fire for spreading misinformation.

"It's a real virus, but I don't know if we should have a vaccine mandate. I'm going to keep living my life," Dillenbeck said.

Lawrence O. Gostin, director of the O'Neill Institute for National and Global Health Law at Georgetown University Law Center, said that while there is a modern history of childhood vaccination mandates, there have been few

mandates related to adults and no similar vaccination requirements instituted by businesses, universities and government agencies.

"This is a sea change, but urgently needed to pull the U.S. out of this pandemic," he wrote in an email.

Historically, vaccination mandates have been highly effective, Gostin said. Childhood vaccination mandates as a condition of school enrollment boosted rates across the country, and states that eliminated religious and philosophical exemptions had even higher rates of compliance, he said.

After Houston Methodist Hospital became the first company to require vaccination as a condition of employment, the company [reported a 99 percent compliance rate](#). Hawaii's Department of Human Resources Development [reported](#) that about 99 percent of the state's 14,000 employees are in compliance with the state's new mandate.

While "a vocal minority" opposes mandates, "vaccinations will become the norm and most resistance will melt away over time," Gostin said.

A 61-year old worker at a Home Depot in Phoenix, who asked to remain anonymous because she is not authorized to speak to the media, said workers who interact with the public should be required to be vaccinated. Her opinion is driven largely by her experience surviving Covid-19 and losing her husband to the virus in December, shortly before the vaccines became available to high-risk people.

"If he could have just held on for six more weeks," she said. "I don't want anyone else to even take the risk of that."

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