

The 'Great Resignation' hits factories the hardest

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FULL TEXT

The Great Resignation that has seen more than 43 million Americans leave their jobs in the past year shows no sign of slowing. Job quitting hit a record in November.

Restaurants and hotels have had the highest resignation rate, and that's hardly surprising. The pandemic has caused millions of workers to reassess their lives and walk away from low-paying jobs. Many are getting hired quickly elsewhere for more money and better hours. Health-care workers are also quitting at record rates, as doctors, nurses and aides face burnout after their harrowing experience these past two years.

But another part of the resignation story has received far less attention. Manufacturing has weathered the biggest surge in workers quitting - a nearly 60 percent jump compared with pre-pandemic. No other industry has seen an increase like that.

It's a remarkable shift. Manufacturing has long been glorified in American society for offering a middle-class lifestyle. President Biden campaigned on reviving the sector; so did former president Donald Trump. News stories lamented the loss of manufacturing jobs in the Great Recession. Yet suddenly workers are voluntarily leaving these jobs at rates never seen before.

Part of what's going on here is covid-19. In manufacturing, you can't work from home. A worker at a factory in Ohio that produces a popular kitchen appliance told me she lives in constant fear of an outbreak. The company she works for has an official policy requiring all workers to wear masks, but it's not enforced.

"Last Thursday, I decided to count how many people were wearing masks properly," said Alicia, who asked that her last name not be used out of fear of retribution for speaking to the media. "Out of 200 people I saw, only 12 were wearing it properly. Most had the mask down on their chin."

Numerous factory workers also said staffing is so low right now that they are basically being forced to work six days a week. Alicia said a young mom she used to work with took a job at a gas station to have more control over her schedule.

But something deeper is driving the spike, too. The reality is the sector no longer provides the good-paying jobs it once did. From 1976 to 2006, average hourly pay for a rank-and-file factory worker was substantially higher than the average across all industries for nonsupervisory workers. Now manufacturing pay is below average.

Pay raises have been especially meager in "nondurable" manufacturing. Food-preparation facilities such as meatpacking plants are a prime example. The pay is low, conditions are harsh, and there have been severe covid outbreaks. As retail stores, restaurants and warehouses hike pay, nondurable manufacturing jobs look less attractive. Average pay for rank-and-file warehouse and transportation workers is now over \$25 an hour vs. \$22.62 for nondurable manufacturing workers.

Some economists point out that hiring in manufacturing has been robust, suggesting many workers are quitting one factory and going to another where they can earn more. That's likely true, but the industry is still down almost 220,000 workers.

Another important shift has been the rise of the two-tiered pay system in manufacturing. While some manufacturing jobs are unionized and come with pay around \$30 an hour and generous benefits, more and more factories are also employing temporary workers. Temps typically make closer to \$20 an hour, with fewer benefits.

The two-tiered system is dragging down overall pay, especially for newer workers. This issue was at the heart of the recent strike at Kellogg's breakfast cereal plants. Kellogg's ultimately agreed to raise temp pay from about \$22 to \$24.11 an hour and to move more temp workers into the higher-paying tier.

Workers had almost no leverage during the Great Recession, when jobs were scarce and manufacturers said they needed to cut costs to survive. But things are vastly different now. Job openings are near record highs, and there aren't enough workers to fill them. This is the best job seekers' market ever recorded. And the manufacturing sector overall looks strong.

Workers understand this. There have been about 140 walkouts at manufacturing businesses since the pandemic began, according to Payday Report, which tracks worker uprisings.

Manufacturing workers want higher pay. But they also want respect, a safe workplace and more flexible schedules, and they're willing to walk out if they don't get it.

The past year has been a story of worker empowerment. So far, the biggest pay increases have gone to the bottom quarter of workers - those making under about \$17 an hour. Will the next rung of workers see similar big gains in 2022? What happens in manufacturing will be telling.

An industry that has quietly looked for ways to reduce labor costs is now facing a reckoning.

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