

BUSINESS

As Southland heat wave hits, fast-food union says safety rules aren't being followed



A refuse operator for the City of Long Beach Environmental Services Bureau wipes his forehead as he works during a 2022 heat wave. (Al Seib / For The Times)



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The season's most dangerous heat wave has arrived in Southern California, and yet many workplaces are not prepared.

So says a new report by job safety advocacy nonprofit Worksafe that surveyed about 340 fast-food workers at roughly 200 chain restaurants across California.

The report, released this week, found that 58% of fast-food workers surveyed in July said they had worked in excessive heat conditions in the last year. And nearly half, or 48%, reported experiencing heat illness symptoms including headaches, fatigue, dizziness, confusion, muscle pain or nausea.

A year ago, California adopted new safety regulations to protect more than a million workers laboring in warehouses, kitchens, laundry rooms and other hot indoor settings.

But the report, conducted in collaboration with the California Fast Food Workers Union, suggests that efforts to implement and enforce the new rules in kitchens have fallen short.

“Our message is simple: every worker deserves safe and healthy working conditions and a voice on the job to speak up when it gets dangerously hot,” said Rocío Saénz, secretary-treasurer of Service Employees International Union, which is affiliated with the fast-food union, in a statement this week, as union members across the U.S. voiced concerns about high heat conditions.



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[California's rule regulating heat](#) in indoor workplaces took effect in July 2024. The rule, adopted by the California Division of Occupational Safety and Health, lays out heat illness prevention measures for indoor workplaces. It requires employers to provide easy access to clean drinking water and cooling areas, and to monitor workers for signs of heat illness whenever worksite temperatures reach or exceed 82 degrees.

If temperatures climb to 87 degrees, or employees are required to work near hot equipment, employers must cool the worksite or rotate workers out of hot environments. Workers are to be allowed an unlimited number of cool-down breaks to protect themselves from overheating.

Workers in state prisons and local correctional facilities, including inmate workers and correctional staff, were exempted from the rule after state officials raised cost concerns.



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Of the fast-food workers surveyed, only 18% had been trained on how to handle high heat environments at work and prevent illness; and 12% had received required training on how to monitor for symptoms of heat illness and when to seek emergency medical care, according to the report.

One employee in Alhambra described working in over 100-degree heat, among grills and fryers, according to worker testimony included in the report. She recalled her face and lips becoming pale and drawn and experiencing a bad headache.

Another, who had a high-risk pregnancy, said she was often forced to steady herself against a wall when she felt dizzy. She said that the fire-grilled chicken chain where she works occasionally passes out sheets of paper with safety information and has workers sign, but does not explain the information or take questions.

“It’s important for people to realize how deadly a hazard this is,” said Laura Stock, an occupational safety expert and a former member of the Cal/OSHA standards board. “There needs to be accountability for employers not following the law.”

Stock said that “very robust” enforcement efforts by Cal/OSHA are needed to ensure employers begin to comply, but that she worries staffing shortages are hindering the agency’s efforts. [A recent state audit](#) found that the agency displayed “critical weakness” in its ability to properly conduct inspections and address hazards.

Daniel Lopez, a spokesperson for Cal/OSHA, said the agency remains “committed to protecting all workers, including those in the fast-food industry, from heat and a wide range of workplace hazards.

“California is a national leader in worker safety, most recently becoming one of the first states in the country to adopt enforceable indoor heat protections,” Lopez said in an email. “These efforts reflect our ongoing commitment to strengthen protections for workers in high-risk industries.”

Molly Weedn, a spokesperson for Protect Local Restaurants, a coalition of restaurant and fast food industry groups including the California Restaurant Association and the

International Franchise Association, said the coalition disagreed with the report's conclusions.

“Local restaurant owners take the health and safety of their employees seriously and to assert otherwise is patently false and reinforces a damaging stereotype that restaurant owners—majority of whom are people of color—are uniquely non-compliant with workplace laws,” Weedn said.

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