
ARE WE SAFE?

*Airline Catering Workers Warn of
Dangers on the Tarmac at Sky Chefs*

OCTOBER 7, 2026

UNITE**HERE!**

Background

On the night of August 10th, 2026 Sky Chefs driver Daniel Barajas fell through an open door in an elevated truck while catering a United Airlines flight. The safety mechanism designed to prevent the back truck door from opening while it is in the air failed. His coworker, who was catering the plane with him during the accident, described how he felt:

“It was really scary, I thought my friend was going to die... I actually took the next day off because I couldn’t sleep. I don’t know how to describe the feeling of watching someone fall and thinking they’re dead and having to come out to that mess because you’re the only one there.” This is not the first time Sky Chefs has placed their workers’ safety at risk.

On February 26, 2024, Kei Tse, an airline catering driver at Sky Chefs, fell 15 feet from an elevated truck and died from a traumatic head injury. Cal/OSHA cited Sky Chefs for a “serious” workplace safety violation—meaning that the company’s violation of worker safety law created a “realistic possibility that death or serious physical harm could result.”¹ Kei Tse had worked for Sky Chefs for 30 years and was set to retire in three days.

When we consider airport safety, what Sky Chefs does and doesn’t do on the tarmac matters.

Airline catering transportation workers at Sky Chefs deliver the food and beverage served aboard flights for American, Delta, United, and other major U.S. airlines. They load delivery trucks with heavy carts, navigate across busy airport tarmacs, approach planes with precision, and work on lifts high off the ground on to cater flights. Most of these transportation workers are light truck drivers with commercial driver’s licenses. The vast majority are immigrants from around the world.

Light truck drivers experience more than twice the rate of occupational injuries and illness involving days away from work than workers in all occupations.

According to the Bureau for Labor Statistics, light truck drivers experience more than twice the rate of occupational injuries and illness involving days away from work than workers in all occupations.² This report evaluates the risks of doing this dangerous work on an airport tarmac with the pressure of catering flights on time to avoid delays, with new job combinations that are increasing the workload, and with catering trucks that workers report are sometimes not in optimal working order.

Working Inside of a “Pressure Cooker”

Airlines rely on a complex logistical system that centers on-time performance. One late departure can have a ripple effect that impacts multiple flights and hundreds of passengers. A similar scenario plays out on the tarmac where airline catering is timed to the minute to prevent delays. Flights do

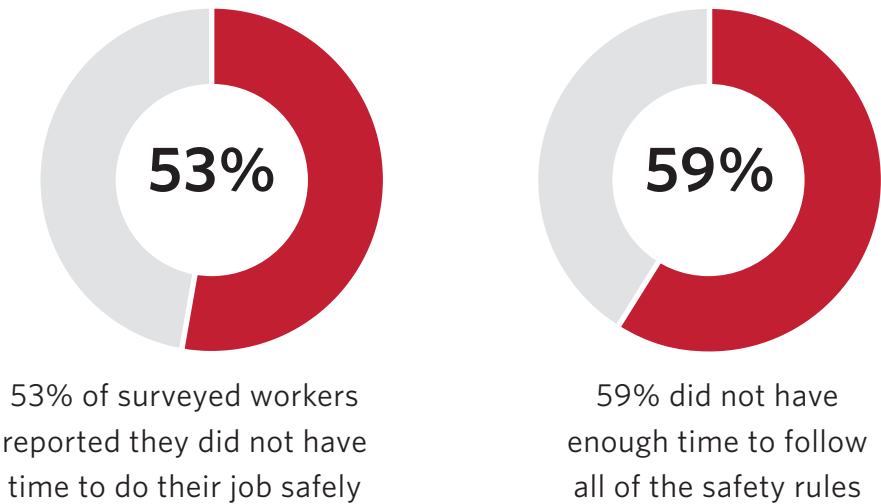
not regularly depart until the food and beverage is aboard, and according to workers, Sky Chefs management warns that airlines impose significant fines if delay is caused by the caterer. ³

There is often not enough time to both follow safety protocols and cater the flight on time...

enough time to both follow safety protocols and cater the flight on time, which leads some workers to feel they must take shortcuts on safety.

The transportation workers who drive food and beverage to the tarmac and load it onto aircraft are trained on the importance of on-time delivery. Running behind schedule can result in discipline. At the same time, drivers must follow detailed safety protocols and can face discipline for failing to do this as well. There is often not

A 2025 survey of workers at O’Hare International Airport found that



Leonid Orenstein, a driver at San Fransisco International Airport for 8 years, echoes this experience, stating:

“We are between a rock and hard place. We need to follow the safety rules and at the same time, we need to make sure the flights leave on time. After having been injured on the job three times, I am trying to prioritize my safety. But sometimes adhering to the safety rules means that I can’t make the customers happy in the way that Sky Chefs wants. Then again, if we rush, we can get injured. One time I had a 200-pound cart fall on my foot because the floor of the truck was in bad condition and I was rushing.”



Leonid Orenstein

Drivers report experiencing stress from these conditions, stress which

is exacerbated by knowing that if they have an accident, they may face discipline, including termination.

"In the past, I got disciplined for a flight being delayed. And I've been hurt on the job twice. One of those times, I felt like management blamed me and I was worried they would fire me. When you're working in a high stress environment like this, you can get distracted. This leads to making little mistakes that leads to stressing out and making bigger mistakes. It's just a pressure cooker. Sometimes I have to cater the flights in a way that I know is less safe just to get my job done."

—Sam Scott, Driver at Portland International Airport for 8 years



The combination of stress and long hours can be catastrophic:

"In June of 2025, a van driver crashed straight into an airplane. He got hurt in his head, ear and eye....⁴ The plane had to be put out of service. This driver had worked almost 90 hours that week because there aren't enough people to do the job. Sky Chefs doesn't pay enough, so people leave. We don't want to work overtime because we want to be with our families, but at the same time, because we don't get paid enough and everything is so expensive, we have to work overtime to pay the bills. Sky Chefs fired the van driver because of this accident."

— Jaouad Benmoussa, Driver at Boston Logan International Airport for 20 years



Single Operator Catering: A new protocol puts workers at risk

In 2025, Sky Chefs announced that a single operator catering protocol was being expanded to additional U.S. airports. Under this protocol, instead of catering flights with two workers, one driver working alone approaches the truck to the aircraft and caters the flight.

- In July 2025, after single operator catering was introduced at Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport, a worker suffered an accident in which he was crushed between a catering truck and the plane. Until a couple of months before the incident, there would have been a second worker inside the vehicle with their foot on the brake. But at the time of the accident, the worker was assigned to work alone. While he was removing chocks intended to

keep the truck from moving, it started to roll forward. Fearing that he could lose his job if the truck even touched the plane on his watch, the worker tried to stop it with his own body. His leg was pulled under the truck and broken in several places and his arm was pinned by the front of the truck to the airplane's engine. He was rushed to the hospital where he ultimately underwent multiple surgeries on his leg.

- Other workers in Minneapolis report that they experience back and shoulder pain now that the same job that used to be performed by two workers is being done by just one. 64% of Minneapolis drivers surveyed said that workloads should be reduced, for example, by adding helpers or giving more time to cater flights.
- At Miami International Airport, where the single operator protocol has been in effect for years, workers report injuries over time because the catering carts are very heavy for one person to move.



Morris Kuyateh

"Sometimes the carts are so heavy I have to use all of my strength to move them. I don't know how long I can continue to do this work."

—Morris Kuyateh, driver at Minneapolis International Airport

"Carts can fall on you while you are moving them. They have fallen on my coworkers' fingers. They've hit me in the knee, and one fell on my foot, but I kept working."

—Rafael Ortega, driver at Miami International Airport



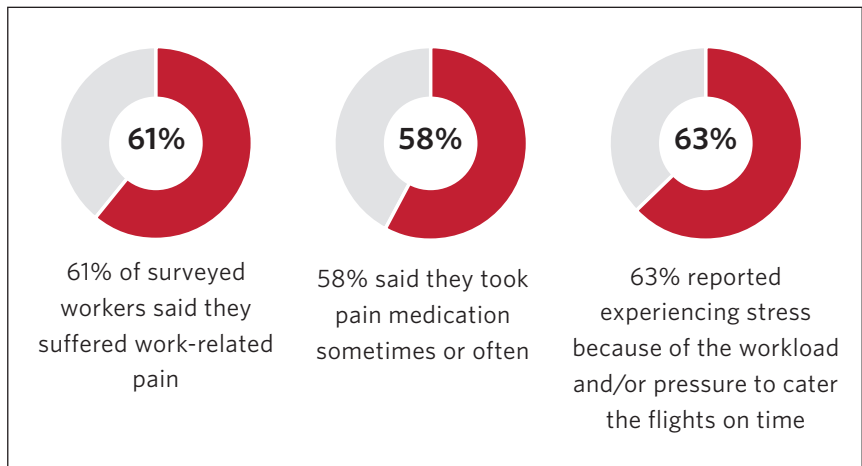
Rafael Ortega

In January 2026 we completed a survey of 72 airline catering transportation workers in Minneapolis and Miami where the single operator catering protocol is currently in effect: 40% reported they feel "unsafe" at work, and another 29% reported feeling only "somewhat safe." Of those drivers:

- 61% said they suffered work-related pain
- 58% said they took pain medication sometimes or often
- More than 20% reported work-related injuries
- 63% reported experiencing stress because of the workload and/or pressure to cater the flights on time

Sky Chef’s move to expand single operator catering comes even after the fatal accident of Kei Tse, a driver in Sacramento, in February 2024. Cal/OSHA found that “the Employer failed to implement their Injury and Illness Prevention Program by not effectively evaluating and mitigating specific hazards associated with performing a two-person catering

operation by only one team member working in an elevated catering truck.”⁵



Problems with Catering Trucks

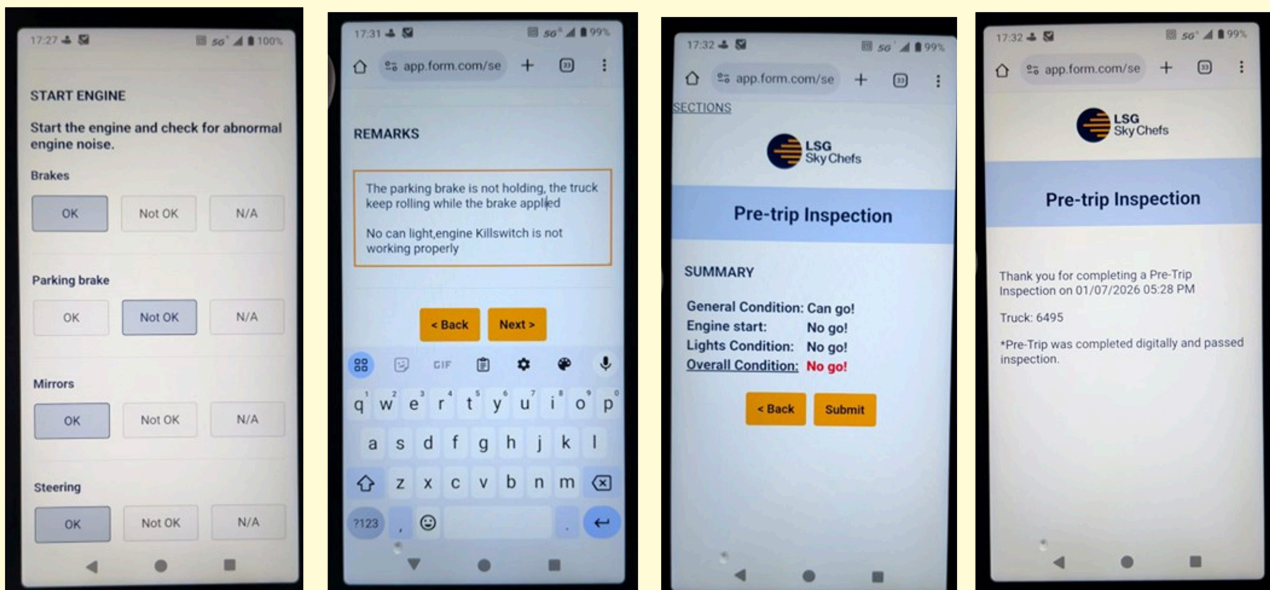
Sky Chefs workers report that some catering trucks are old and not in optimal working condition. These workers say that they follow the proper procedure to report to management that the trucks need service but say that there are instances where the trucks remain in use without being repaired.

- **In New York City**, during the months of June and July 2026, several drivers at JFK reported no air conditioning in a total of twenty-four catering trucks. Highs for some of these days hit 90, 86 and 100 degrees.
- **In Philadelphia**, a driver reported that as of July 16, 2026, only one catering truck has working air conditioning; workers take turns using this truck to get a break from the record-breaking temperatures. He reported broken air conditioning has been a common issue since he started working at Sky Chefs three years ago. The driver also reported a truck that with a broken window on the driver’ side, a truck with a rear door that that is so difficult to open that workers sometimes just leave it open while they do their deliveries, and lack of functioning heaters in the winter months.
- **In Portland**, a worker described some trucks with defrosters that do not work, requiring workers to wipe condensation off with their clothing or leaning out of the window to see.

- **In Chicago**, in June and July of 2026, drivers reported several issues in catering trucks, which, under Sky Chefs safety policies should require they be taken out of service. These included:
 - Reports of broken guard rails on trucks. Guard rails protect drivers from falling when the vehicle is lifted high into the air to cater the planes. Missing or non-functional seatbelts. A worker reported two instances of trucks having no seat belts for the driver or the helper during the week of July 5, 2026.
 - In a 2025 survey, 70% of transportation workers responded that the trucks are “some-what unsafe” or “very unsafe.” One worker reported, “guardrails don’t lock properly on some [trucks], sometimes the horn doesn’t work, the lock pin is missing on some to lock the handbrake.” Another worker reported, “[trucks] don’t have proper headlights. It’s dark. We can’t see at night.”
 - In July of 2026, a worker reported that few trucks have air conditioning despite the intense summer heat.

On January 7, 2026, a driver at SFO completed the pre-trip inspection of a truck through the company’s app. He reported that the parking breaks were not holding. The system marked it as a “no go” item. Drivers report that, according to their training, No Go items are safety issues that warrant putting the truck out of service until they are fixed. But the electronic system did the opposite — it auto responded that this truck with faulty breaks had passed inspection. The truck was used that night on the tarmac.

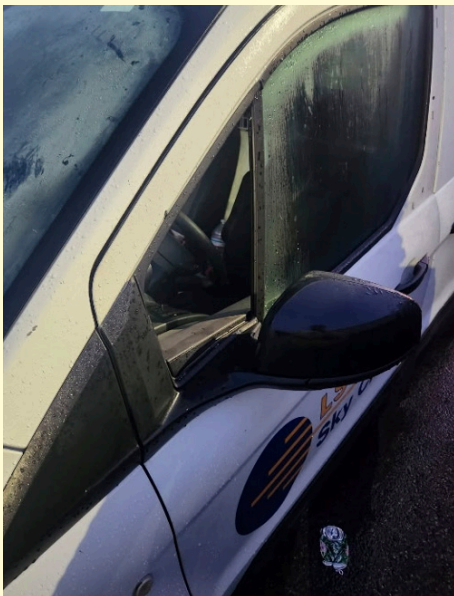
Around October 16, 2025, this same driver reported a truck as having both taillights out. He then went on a two week vacation. When he returned, the truck was in use and still had not been fixed. He spoke to the manager in person. Still no change. The taillights were finally fixed in mid-December — approximately two months later.





Broken guard rails on two different catering trucks. The left image shows a joint in the guard rail secured with a zip tie, and the center image shows the joint unsecured. ORD 6/15/26 and 6/23/26

Above: Example of guard rail with a properly secured joint at SFO



Truck with broken window PHL 7/10/26



Truck with missing wind shield wiper ORD 6/14/26

- **In Phoenix**, as described in the first edition of this report, workers reported that trucks lack functioning air conditioning units, a situation leading to unsafe conditions. Workers alleged to the City that this violated an ordinance requiring that vehicles with enclosed cabs to have functioning A/C no later than May 1, 2025. After conducting a spot inspection of 12 catering trucks entering the airfield on July 2, 2025, the City communicated to Sky Chefs:

"None of the 12 inspected vehicles that afternoon had functioning air conditioning. Vehicle cabin temperatures were observed to be in excess of 100 degrees Fahrenheit, and air blowing from vehicle air conditioning vents was observed to range between 85- and 95-degrees Fahrenheit. Through these inspections, the City has determined that Sky Chefs is not in compliance with the ordinance."⁶

By the winter of 2026, the air conditioning was functional in the trucks. UNITE HERE welcomes this change, but questions why it came only after workers came forward to ask the City to inspect the facility to ensure compliance with the heat ordinance.



Truck with check engine light on, ABS light on, and needs repair light on ORD 6/9/26



Truck with exposed electrical wires, MIA 2/10/26

- **In Miami,** as described in the first edition of this report, a worker reported some trucks with steering mechanisms that didn't work properly, a lack of air conditioning, poor visibility, broken backup cameras, and doors that stuck and required a lot of physical force to open. When asked what improvement could improve safety, more than 60% of Miami drivers surveyed said that the company should upgrade or replace the trucks. In spring of 2026, after Miami workers presented the first edition of this report to local management, the company introduced 28 new trucks to the Miami kitchens. This does not constitute the entire fleet, but the company states more trucks are scheduled to arrive between July-September of 2026. While these new trucks are welcome, UNITE HERE again questions why they came only after workers spoke out.
- **In San Francisco,** as described in the first edition of this report, a worker reported some trucks with broken headlights and taillights, parking brakes that did not fully function, and steering mechanisms that did not properly work. One worker described finding a truck without a taillight and reporting it. The worker went on vacation and when the worker returned, the taillight was still out. Workers attended public hearings with airport authorities to share the first addition of this report in the spring of 2026. Since then, many of the trucks have been fixed. Again, UNITE HERE welcomes the repairs, but questions why they came only after workers spoke out.

"I have spent a whole year recovering from an injury at work. I fell on the ramp while loading a flight. The truck door sticks and is very hard to open. I had to push really hard to open the door, and my left hand slipped. I fell backwards onto my back, and I landed on my left shoulder and side of my head. My rotator cuff was torn along with a tendon and muscle underneath. The surgeon told me he had to completely rebuild my left shoulder."

—Rafael Ortega, driver at Miami International Airport

“The trucks are sometimes not fixed even when we tell report they’re broken. Recently, I was catering a flight and the extender got stuck while the truck was raised about 10-15’ up in the air. I was stuck up in the air for about 45 minutes and couldn’t get down or out, waiting for maintenance to fix it. As a driver, that’s my worst nightmare, being stuck in the truck. What if something happened to me up there?”

The next day, I was assigned the same truck. I told them I didn’t want that broken truck. I had put it out of service the day before. But they said it was already loaded for catering, and they wanted me to drive it anyway. When I was out on the tarmac, the same thing happened. I got stuck up there again. It makes me feel like we’re put in danger. It feels like the company cares more about avoiding delays than about our safety.”

—Sam Scott, driver at Portland International Airport

What do the Health and Safety Records Show?

Federal and state OSHA laws require employers to maintain logs describing the on-the-job injuries suffered by their employees. Sky Chefs’ own OSHA records paint a picture of the variety of hazards that its employees face.

From January 2025 through June 2026, Sky Chefs recorded a total of 630 injuries — more than one every day. With an average of about 10,000 workers in the bargaining unit represented by the union, that is approximately 1 injury for every 16 workers.⁷ These resulted in 5,998 days of missed work and 9,389 days of job transfer and/or restrictions in that time period.

60 injuries in this time period involved catering trucks and vans, including workers falling from trucks, getting hit by truck doors, and collisions — injuries that occurred about once a week.

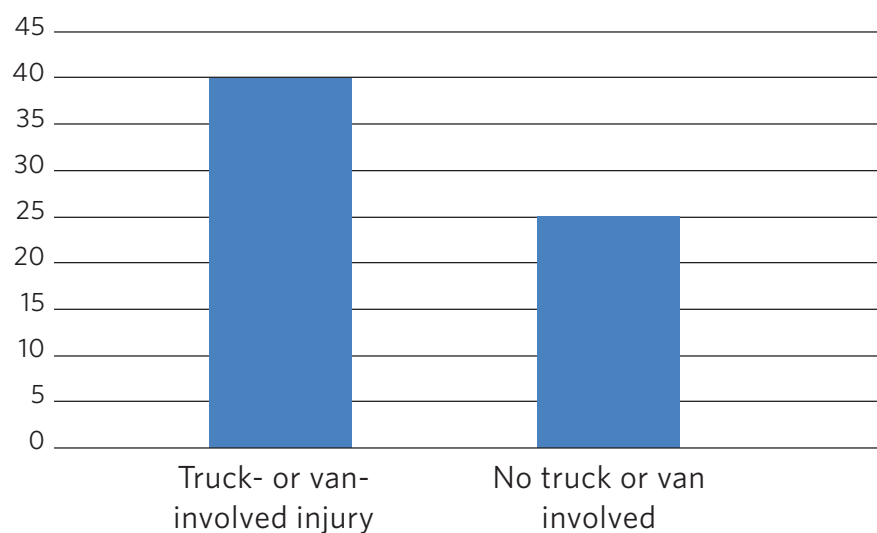
Workers with transportation job titles were involved in 209 injuries, close to three every week.⁸ Catering carts were the cause of 102 injuries in this period.

These examples of worker injuries from the 2025-2026 OSHA logs are illustrative:

- “Kei Tse walked off the back of the truck and passed away” (SMF 2/26/24, worker died)
- “EE was inside of tractor/trailer when trailer began to move, EE fell from trailer onto ground below dock.” (SFO, 9/22/25, 30 days of job transfer/restriction)

- “Contusion to arms and legs [sic] when he fell between the Aircraft and the truck platform” (MSP 2/8/24, 22 days of job transfer/restriction)
- “EE states he was at the airport ramp catering a flight, EE was on the back of truck and there was lack of lighting, EE’s foot got caught with the strap. EE sustained a sprain/strain to the right knee and right wrist.” (JFK 1/16/25, 108 days away from work and 72 days on job transfer/restriction)
- “Hit by truck from behind-Back Strain” (ORD 10/8/24, 2 workers in same incident — one had 1 day away from work, other had 3 days away from work and 3 days on job transfer/restriction)
- “Employee was closing the truck rear door on the dock using the rear step to support herself to latched [sic] the door. The employee foot slipped from the step and the employee hold herself on the loading ramp that was in the up position ending in laceration to two of the employee fingers” (LAX 5/31/25, 78 days away from work and 78 days on job transfer/restriction)

Injuries that involved trucks or vans resulted in an average number of days away from work much higher than injuries that did not involve a truck or van



- “[Employee] states he was at the airport ramp guiding a truck on the [Airport Operations Area] when the front wheel ran over his right foot. EE sustained crush injuries to his right foot (JFK, 5/29/2025, resulting in 124 days away from work.)
- “Employee[e] was catered (*sic*) an American Airline [aircraft]... the maintenance crew... moved the [aircraft] and tip over the truck to the side with the driver inside the elevated catering box. Driver suffered of (*sic*) multiple Contutions (*sic*).” (LAX, 4/4/2025, resulting in 90 days away from work and 90 days of job transfer or restriction.)
- “Roll up door was too heavy and hurt his lower back—lumbar strain, reduced ROM lumbar spine” (SEA, 1/23/2025, resulting in 16 days away from work and 5 days of job transfer or restriction.)
 - “EE states he was catering Korean lounge and due to loading the carts onto the ramp and van, he felt a pull in his back. EE sustained sprain/strain to the lower back.” (JFK 1/12/26, 74 days away from work)
 - “EE states he was at the airport ramp and was lifting heavy garbage bags when he felt a pull on his shoulder. EE sustained sprain/strain to the right shoulder.” (JFK, 2/24/26, 35 days away from work)
 - “EE experience pain in back while pushing nine (9) carts of liquor by themselves” (SFO 1/23/26, 5 days job transfer or restriction)

It's time for safe working conditions for Sky Chefs drivers

SKY CHEFS should adopt union contract provisions that:

1. Establish protections against retaliation and discipline for enforcing the contract or taking legal action or refusing to carry out an unsafe task.
2. Require all trucks to be in good working order. All trucks with critical safety items must be put out of service until the issue has been fixed.
3. Prohibit the expansion of single operator catering. Where it was in effect for years, make modifications to the program to ensure that it is safe, including increasing staffing.
4. Limit to how many flights can be loaded in each truck.
5. Properly staff the heavy job of loading the trucks.
6. Cease disciplining workers for delay related issues.

AMERICAN, DELTA, and UNITED AIRLINES, as the largest clients of Sky Chefs in the United States, should require that all contractors' trucks servicing their planes be in good working order. They should not allow single operator catering to be used on their flights. Further, they should ensure that their catering contractors have union contracts that give workers an enforcement mechanism to protect their health and safety, preventing a dangerous race to the bottom.

AIRPORT OFFICIALS should require that all trucks operating at their airports be in good working condition and conduct regular independent inspections. They should not allow single operator catering to be used at their airport. They should implement protections against retaliation for workers who prioritize safety on the job and/or report safety concerns. Further, they should support workers in their struggle for union contracts that give workers an enforcement mechanism to protect their health and safety, thereby preventing a dangerous race to the bottom.

LOCAL ELECTED LEADERS should dialogue with both employees and employers about safety for airport workers. They should call on Sky Chefs and the airlines to work together to ensure all airport trucks are in good working condition, and that single operating catering not be permitted. Where appropriate, they should call for investigations into airport safety risks. The fatality suffered in Sacramento and the serious crushing injury suffered in Minneapolis should be a wake-up call to local leaders. They should not wait for another tragedy before they intervene.

Endnotes

- 1 https://www.osha.gov/ords/imis/establishment.inspection_detail?id=1730845.015; see 8 C.C.R. § 334(c)(1) (defining "serious" violation)
- 2 Light truck drivers experienced an annualized incidence rate of nonfatal occupational injuries and illnesses involving days away from work more than twice that of all occupations (248.9 incidents per 10,000 full-time workers, compared to 120.7 incidents) in 2020. 'Light truck worker incidence of nonfatal injuries resulting in days away from work, 2020,' retrieved from BLS 12/22/25. <https://unitehere.box.com/s/8emsr2889kj1z628y720h8pscl6ybw1z>
- 3 From Sam Scott, Leonid Ornstein and Jaouad Benmoussa interviews
- 4 WCVB Boston: Driver injured after van collides with aircraft at Logan Airport <http://wcvb.com/article/driver-injured-after-van-collides-with-aircraft-at-logan-airport/65251795?>
- 5 OSHA incident report 164498, event date 2/24/2024; p. 12
- 6 <https://www.abc15.com/news/local-news/investigations/i-feel-unsafe-working-airline-catering-workers-in-phoenix-say-they-face-dangerous-conditions>
- 7 The OSHA logs may include workers who are not part of the UNITE HERE bargaining unit, but union status is not noted on the logs.
- 8 Transportation job titles included: Airline Food & Beverage (Abea); CSR / CS Rep; Driver / Unit Driver; Driver Helper; Helper; Loader; Ramp; and Transportation. Not all of these job titles appear in the CBA. Transportation job titles included: Coordinator, CSR, Customer Service Rep, Customer Service, Driver, Driver Helper, Guide, Helper, Loader, Transportation, Unit Driver, and Warehouse Driver.

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