DON’T LET EXPLOITATION BE POLISHED OVER

A GUIDE TO THE NAIL INDUSTRY
Introduction
A. Background on the challenges faced by nail salon workers
B. Overview of the purpose of the zine

Health and Safety in the Workplace
A. Overview of chemical exposure and its dangers
B. Tips for avoiding chemical exposure
C. Respiratory hazards, covid, & ventilation
D. Best practices for minimizing the risk of injury
E. Information on workers' rights and protections

Taking Care of Your Health and Well-Being
A. Importance of self-care in a demanding work environment
B. Suggestions for maintaining physical and mental health
C. Resources for support and assistance

Labor Rights and Advocacy
A. Overview of relevant labor laws and regulations
B. Information on the minimum wage, overtime pay, and other protections
C. Advice on how to join a union or form a worker-led organization
D. Ideas for collective action and advocacy

Conclusion
A. Reflection on the importance of supporting nail salon workers
B. Call to action for allies and supporters
Think of a nail salon in your local strip mall. They will likely have pedicure chairs with massage capabilities, hundreds of nail polish bottles in every shade, manicurist stations, steamed towels, complimentary drinks, soothing music, whimsical decor, and plush chairs to relax in while your nails dry.

These features of the industry, which inspire relaxation and beauty in the customer, mask the particular racial and gendered violence and exploitation inflicted on nail salon workers by a capitalist-imperialist system. This violence and exploitation goes on unchallenged, even deemed just and natural for two main reasons: 1) the work is perceived as “low-skill” and “frivolous” labor and 2) the vast majority of U.S. nail salon workers are Vietnamese immigrant women.

Nail Salons in the United States today are an immigrant-and-women-majority industry, with an estimated 212,519 workers as of 2016. 79% of workers in the industry are foreign-born, out of which 74% are Vietnamese!

Capitalism is a system that prioritizes profits over people. It must, therefore, create myths and an ideology that lures working class people to go against their own interests, to line the pockets of the greedy capitalists. One enduring myth is that of “low-skilled” labor. All forms of labor – including line cooks, maids, nannies, and nail salon workers – have “a unique set of skills and knowledge required to succeed in them;” there is no such thing as a low-skilled worker. Everyone who has ever painted just one coat of nail polish knows the intense concentration, precision, and steady hand necessary to have a somewhat decent result. Add on the cuticle work, nail shaping, acrylic & Gel-X extensions, and intricate designs, that are part and parcel of the job and it is clear that nail salon workers possess immense skill.

The labor of nail salon workers are further devalued as “frivolous” because they perform beauty services, and society believes Beauty to be of little importance and beauty services as elective procedures; but is it true? According to a year long study conducted by sociologists Jaclyn Wong and Andrew Penner, “it was not ‘innate attractiveness’ that corresponded with higher salaries for women but rather evidence of having put more effort into their grooming routines.” Through the use of nail salon workers’ beautifying labor, women are able to have access to better material conditions. It cannot get less “frivolous” than that.

The myths of low-skilled and frivolous labor are exacerbated when the laborers are racialized, immigrant women. The 1950s-1970s imperialist war in Vietnam, instigated by the U.S. to prevent the spread of communism, resulted in the widespread destruction of Vietnamese land and life, turning innumerable peasants into landless refugees and ripped “South Vietnam’s social fabric to shreds.” The intense poverty and horrific living conditions prompted “the arrival of 125,000 Vietnamese refugees to the United States in [the year] 1975” alone. Is it a surprise that the mass immigration of Vietnamese citizens to America fleeing the war coincides with the entrance and eventual domination of Vietnamese women in
The story of Vietnamese women’s place in the nail salon industry begins with the visit of actress Tippi Hedren to the Pendleton Refugee Camp in 1975, where her personal manicurist Dusty Coots trained an initial 20 women who would go on to receive nail licenses and open their own businesses, able to offer lower prices than other salons at the time. Today, in every state except New York, nail salons are primarily owned and staffed by Vietnamese women.

Being a refugee, forced to migrate to the nation that upended yours, puts you in a ripe condition for super-exploitation. Being a woman, whose labor has been historically rendered invisible and seen as less valuable to capital than a man’s, also makes you a prime candidate for super-exploitation. Being an immigrant woman of color, working in a feminine industry that primarily services other women (restate), further devalues your labor and makes you ripe for exploitation.

Despite the high degree of skill and licensing necessary to be a salon technician, workers in the industry suffer harsh rates of exploitation in a gendered, racialized system where the legal vulnerability of immigrant status offers insufficient recourse. The same low prices that originally expanded Vietnamese entrepreneurship in the industry has led to fierce competition to maintain profits at the expense of workers’ health and salaries.

The myth of the “American Dream” continues to attract women from overseas to the industry, in which they can fall victim to debt bondage, subminimum wages and wage theft, denial of overtime by bosses, and exposure to hazardous chemicals. 78 percent of salon workers are estimated to be “low wage workers” (define). The “Nail Files” report found that 61% of salon workers in California are paid less than the minimum wage, and 89% are not paid overtime. Where tips are expected to make up the difference to reach the state or federal minimum wage, tips can often be stolen by employers (find statistic on this). Because of their immigration status and the presence of language barriers, many nail salon workers suffer these injustices without means of recourse.

Tipping as a practice is an ongoing legacy of racism in the United States, given its origin as a method to avoid paying black train porters a living wage, an exploitative tactic continuing in nail salons, restaurants, and beyond. It is a means for businesses to avoid the responsibility of paying their workers a living wage and instead foists that responsibility onto the consumer, which further atomizes the working class and erodes solidarity.

In the time of COVID-19 and other emerging respiratory illnesses, nail salon workers are especially vulnerable in a workspace where they have historically faced respiratory, reproductive, and other health hazards. With many salon workers lacking access to healthcare, deteriorating health over time not only makes it more difficult to find work in other industries, but the double burden of work inside and outside the home for women workers becomes exponential. The immiseration compounded upon salon workers’ health continues into succeeding generations, given the low birth weights and potential birth disabilities that the children of said workers are subject to, in a country with minimal public health assistance, if any for undocumented immigrants.

Salon owners’ control over information disseminated to workers in a workspace where language barriers are prevalent has challenged collective advocacy for safer workspaces and left many in the dark about the consequences of the products with which they work to beautify the public.
In nail salons throughout the country, workers bear the brunt of chemical exposure, risk of infections, and the muscle strain of repetitive movements. A dizzying array of chemicals can be found in nail polishes and other products, which without adequate ventilation present an accumulating risk to the health of salon technicians working long hours.

According to OSHA, exposure to salon product chemicals can have consequences such as asthma and other respiratory illnesses, allergic reactions, reproductive harm, and even cancer. Inhaling fumes isn’t the only risk, even dusts inhaled from filing or using acrylic powders can be a vector for illness!

Colorado University at Boulder professor Lupita Montoya likens working in a nail salon to working in an “oil refinery or auto garage.” For fear of repercussions and lacking the resources to adequately protect employees, finding a testing site amongst Colorado salons was a challenge for Dr. Montoya. Exposure time is key, and her findings in monitoring VOCs (volatile organic compounds) indicated that “in some salons, lifetime cancer risk was up to 100 times higher than baseline EPA-issued levels.” The risk is not equal between client and employee when you’re working 8 plus hours a day!

The covid-19 pandemic exacerbates and mirrors the ever-present danger and threat of illness nail technicians faced prior to the global Covid-19 outbreak. According to a 2014 study conducted by the University of Washington, “inhalation and skin contact” are the “main routes of exposure to chemicals and dust in the nail salon.” The close proximity of the nail technician’s “breathing zone to the chemicals and dust during the nail treatments is a cause of concern.”

SARS-COV-2, the virus that causes Covid-19, is an airborne virus. It is primarily spread in the following ways: 1) the inhalation of air carrying very small droplets/aerosol particles that contain the virus or 2) infected droplets landing on exposed orifices and mucosal membranes, like the eye and nose. This virus poses a significant threat to nail technicians; they work in close proximity to numerous clients, which increases their chance of contracting the virus, and work in salons with insufficient, sub-par ventilation. “According to Nellie Brown, a biologist and chemist specializing in industrial hygiene and the western regional director for the Chemical Hazard Information Program (CHIP) at Cornell University, the recommended ventilation standard for nail salons is 25 CFM (cubic feet per minute provide definition) per person.” A standard unlikely to be met between commercial landlords prioritizing cost saving measures – including cutting corners on proper HVAC installation and maintenance(provide definition) – over their fellow man’s right to clean air and safe working conditions, nail salon owners/entrepreneurs viewing an employee as a commodity to exploit rather than a person to protect, and the US government allowing, facilitating, and legislating capital’s domination over the worker.

President Biden’s recent declaration that “the pandemic is over” is unequivocally false and serves as a testament to his willingness to sacrifice workers at the altar of capitalism. At the time of this writing, the U.S averages over 3,000 covid-related deaths a week in 2023 – a number that only accounts for those deaths that get officially reported.

The covid pandemic is a disabling event that disproportionately affects “racial and ethnic minority groups” due to long standing structural inequalities within the healthcare system. It is estimated that “1 in 5” cases will experience Long-Covid: a post-viral disease that causes cognitive, neurological, and vascular impairments so debilitating, it has pushed as many as 4 million Americans out of work.”

Nail technicians, who often don't have access to health insurance and whose immigration status could prevent them from accessing life-sustaining unemployment and disability relief (rephrase) from the government, will be in a desperate situation if they are forced out of work due to illness or disability. Covid is a labor issue! Every nail salon worker has the right to clean air: free of toxic chemicals and respiratory viruses!

The next section will provide details on how nail technicians can organize and demand a safe working environment to prevent the harms outlined above.
NAIL TECHS ARE EXPOSED TO DOZENS OF CHEMICALS AND FUMES
Working in a nail salon can be both physically and emotionally demanding, as nail salon workers often spend long hours standing and leaning over work tables, performing repetitive motions that can lead to long-term damage if not addressed. In addition, exposure to toxic chemicals can pose serious health risks if safety protocols are not followed, and the demands of a fast-paced work environment can contribute to high levels of stress and burnout.

To mitigate these risks and ensure a healthier workplace, it's important for nail salon workers to prioritize their own well-being and advocate for their rights as employees. One key area of concern is the ergonomic hazards that can arise from working on hard surfaces and leaning over work tables. To prevent long-term damage, nail salon workers should take quick breaks between clients, get up and stretch to decompress their joints, and demand comfortable workspaces with foam pads for resting elbows, adjustable chairs, and breaks for stretching. These small changes can make a big difference in reducing physical strain and preventing long-term damage.

Another important aspect of workplace safety in the nail salon industry is protecting oneself from exposure to toxic chemicals. Workers should demand that salon owners replace toxic products containing the “toxic trio” of toluene, formaldehyde, and dibutyl phthalate with “3-free” products. It’s also essential to ensure that safety-data sheets (SDS) are accessible to every employee, inquire into the level of ventilation in the workspace, and use goggles and disposable gloves to keep harmful products out of the skin and eyes. Nail salon workers should also make sure that HVAC systems are on and maintained and consider adding ventilated work tables to their workspace to help reduce long-term exposure to fumes.

It’s important for nail salon workers to know their rights as employees and demand a safe and healthy workplace. If they are paid by the hour, do not rent the space, and use the owner’s tools and equipment, they may be considered employees, and the responsibility for workplace safety falls upon the employer. Workers should not allow the boss to cut corners by misclassifying them as independent contractors to skimp out on safety and health benefits. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) is there to back up employees, and it’s important to advocate for oneself and demand a safe and healthy workplace.
Working in a nail salon can be a physically and mentally demanding job. Long hours of standing, repetitive motions, exposure to chemicals, and the pressure to satisfy customers’ demands can lead to physical and mental exhaustion, stress, and burnout. It is crucial for nail salon workers to prioritize their mental and emotional well-being in addition to physical safety.

To promote mental and emotional well-being, nail salon workers should take regular breaks to decompress and recharge. They can also seek support from colleagues and friends by sharing their experiences, discussing their feelings, and receiving validation and encouragement. It is also important to utilize available resources for support and assistance, such as counseling services or mental health hotlines.

Coming together as a group and practicing solidarity with one another can also be empowering and create a more supportive and united work environment. Workers can organize meetings, create support groups, and advocate for their rights as a collective. This can help build a sense of community and foster a more positive work culture. By prioritizing their own health and advocating for their rights, nail salon workers can help create a safer and healthier work environment for themselves and their colleagues.

Together, they can demand safer working conditions, such as proper ventilation and protective equipment, and address issues such as wage theft and labor exploitation. By working collectively, they can improve the well-being of all those in the industry and promote a more equitable and just work environment.

YOUR HEALTH IS NON-NEGOTIABLE. DEMAND THE PROTECTION YOU DESERVE!
The nail salon industry has long been known for exploiting and stealing wages from immigrant women workers. This is due to a variety of factors, including language barriers, lack of knowledge of labor rights, and fear of retaliation from employers. However, it's essential to know that as a nail salon worker, you have legal protections that can help ensure that you and your colleagues are being treated fairly.

One of the most critical labor protections is the right to be paid the minimum wage. While the federal minimum wage is only $7.25 per hour, some states have higher minimum wages. For example, California's minimum wage is $14 per hour for employers with 26 or more employees. It's crucial to know the minimum wage in your state and ensure that you're being paid at least that amount. If you're not being paid the minimum wage, you can file a complaint with the Department of Labor to help protect yourself and your colleagues.

In addition to the minimum wage, it's essential to know your rights regarding overtime pay. As a non-exempt employee, you're entitled to overtime pay, which is 1.5 times your regular rate of pay for hours worked over 40 hours in a week. However, nail salon workers are often misclassified as independent contractors, which means that they're not entitled to overtime pay or other labor protections. By knowing your employment status and making sure that you're being classified correctly, you can help protect yourself and your colleagues from being exploited.

Joining a union is another way to advocate for your labor rights and improve working conditions. Unions can negotiate with employers for better wages, benefits, and working conditions. They can also provide support and resources for workers who are facing labor violations. If there's a union in your area that represents nail salon workers, consider joining it. If there isn't a union, consider forming a worker-led organization to advocate for your rights and the rights of your colleagues.

Finally, collective action and advocacy are essential for improving working conditions in the nail salon industry. By organizing and participating in protests, boycotts, and other forms of direct action, you can demand better working conditions and hold employers accountable for labor violations. Allies and supporters can also play a role in advocating for nail salon workers by supporting worker-led organizations, contacting lawmakers to demand stronger labor protections, and patronizing nail salons that treat workers fairly.

It's important to remember that advocating for your labor rights can be challenging and intimidating, but it's worth it. By knowing your rights, organizing with your colleagues, and seeking support from unions and other organizations, you can help combat labor exploitation in the nail salon industry and ensure that you and your colleagues are treated fairly. Together, we can work towards a more just and equitable workplace for all nail salon workers.
The beauty industry depends on the hard work and skill of nail salon workers, but all too often they are subject to exploitation, abuse, and unfair treatment by their employers. The nail salon industry has been plagued by labor abuse for years, with many nail technicians facing poor working conditions, low wages, and exposure to harmful chemicals. For example, studies have shown that many nail technicians suffer from respiratory problems due to exposure to toxic chemicals such as formaldehyde, toluene, and phthalates. Additionally, many workers in the nail salon industry are immigrants, and may face additional challenges due to language barriers and their immigration status.

We need to recognize the importance of supporting nail salon workers in their fight for better working conditions and fair treatment. But where do we start? The first step is to educate ourselves on the issues facing nail salon workers. This can be done in a variety of ways. There are many advocacy groups and organizations that are working to improve the lives of nail salon workers, and you can start by exploring their websites and learning about the campaigns they are involved in.

Another important way to support nail technicians is to patronize nail salons that prioritize the health and safety of their workers and offer fair wages and benefits. When you choose to spend your money at a nail salon that treats its workers well, you are sending a message to the industry that fair treatment of workers is important to consumers.

You can also advocate for policies and regulations that protect the rights and well-being of nail technicians. This might include supporting campaigns to raise the minimum wage, advocating for better health and safety regulations, and working to prevent wage theft and exploitation in the industry.

But the most important way to support nail salon workers is to stand in solidarity with them and demand fair treatment and dignity for all workers. This means using your voice to speak out against labor abuse in the industry, and calling for better working conditions and protections for nail technicians. You can start by talking to your friends and family about the struggles of nail salon workers, and explaining why fair and just working conditions are so important for all workers.

In the end, the fight for fair treatment of nail salon workers is about creating a more just and equitable world for all workers. By supporting the rights of nail technicians, we are taking a stand for the value and dignity of all workers, and demanding an end to labor abuse and exploitation in the beauty industry. Together, we can make a difference and create a world where all workers are valued and respected.