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## Money

### 'We Are Treated As Disposable': Everlane's Customer-Service Employees Are Unionizing

Everlane has branded itself as committed to sustainability and “radical transparency.” But remote employees for the fashion brand are unionizing, saying that they’re treated as “expendable.”



By Anna Merlan

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21 December 2019, 3:20am



#### AN AD CAMPAIGN FOR EVERLANE

Everlane—the chic, stripped-down, San Francisco-based clothing brand beloved by the tech and media sectors alike—sells nothing so much as an idea. The company says it’s dedicated to both sustainability and “radical transparency,” promising customers, “We reveal the true costs behind all of our products—from materials to labor to transportation.” But the company’s customer-service employees say that what’s not disclosed in that formula is the human cost to their team, a cadre of part-time remote workers who make up a key piece of the business—and who make around \$16 an hour and don’t receive healthcare or other benefits.

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Those employees say their work environment has become increasingly untenable. On Friday, members of that “customer experience” team announced their intention to unionize with the Communications Workers of America. (“It’s a trendy West Coast company so it’s not ‘customer service,’ it’s ‘customer experience,’” one of those workers told us, dryly. “Euphemisms are key to the brand.”) The Everlane workers hope to unionize with CWA Local 9410, which is based in San Francisco and also represents telecommunications employees and daycare workers, among others.

The company had already caught wind of the union effort: Before it was even announced, publicly or internally, management began to respond with carefully worded emails containing a gentle, chic, stripped-down version of the misinformation that companies often feed to unionizing workers.

“I understand that some of you may have been asked to sign a union card and join a movement,” wrote Kelly McLaughlin, the head of the People division at Everlane, their version of an HR Department, in an email that went out late Thursday. It was the second email she’d sent that day with supposedly neutral information on the union drive.

“The Everlane way is transparency and open communications and we know that we can do a better job of bringing our culture to life for all of you,” McLaughlin wrote in the first. “We also have heard that there has been talk about unions among some of you. Deciding whether or not you want a union to represent you is your right but it is a big decision.”

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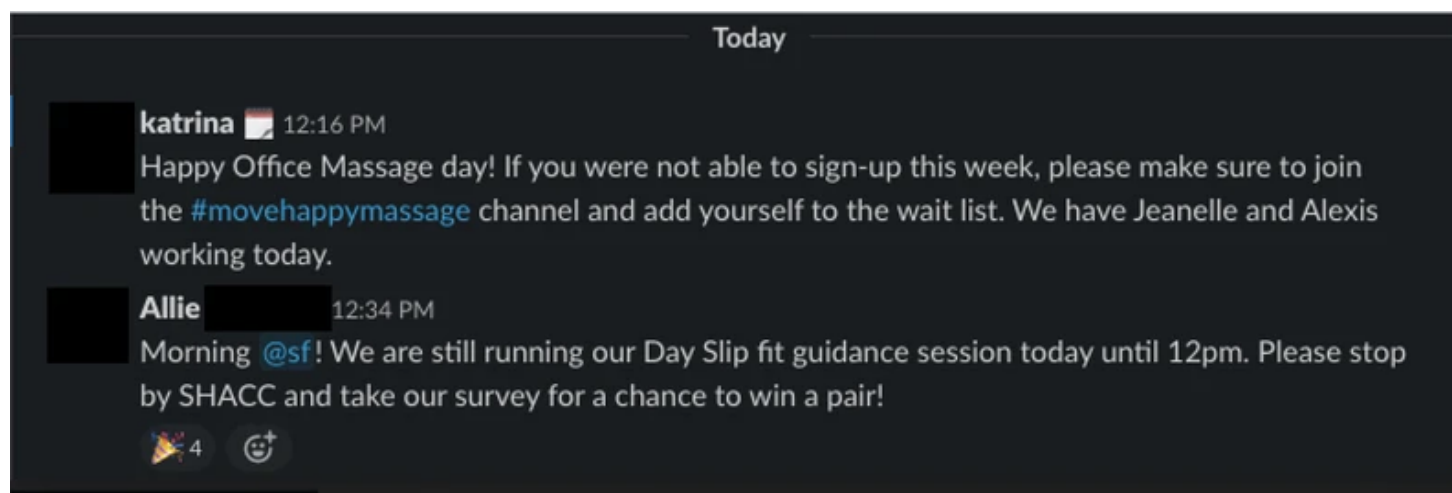
In the second missive, she brought out the big guns: an ominously worded, and rather misleading, fact sheet on the supposed disadvantages of bringing a union into the workplace.

“Signing is a major step because it is a legal document that can designate the union as your exclusive representative and forfeit your right to deal directly with us to resolve issues,” McLaughlin wrote. “This will reduce transparency and we won’t be able to work with each of you individually as we do now to improve your

experience.” (That’s not true: Unionized workplaces have bargaining committees which contain both employees and their union reps. Union contracts are also created by employees to reflect their concerns and priorities, meaning they can decide how much or when they want to bargain directly with their employers and when they want the union involved.)

The customer-experience employees hoping to form a union say that their experience with management is precisely the problem, and that trying to “deal directly” with the company as individuals hasn’t gotten them far. Six unionizing customer-experience employees—and one who recently left the company out of frustration—all described to VICE what they say is an increasingly stressful situation characterized by low pay, frenetic and unpredictable work schedules, and a company culture seemingly intent on keeping them from comparing notes and banding together to improve their working conditions. They all say that customer-experience employees—referred to internally as the “CX team”—as well as those working in retail stores, have markedly different experiences than full-time employees in the San Francisco office, who are offered in-office massages, catered lunches, and an opportunity to drop by and try on newly-released clothing styles. (The remote employees know this because a Slack room for San Francisco employees is public, allowing everyone else to gawk at the benefits they’re not offered.)

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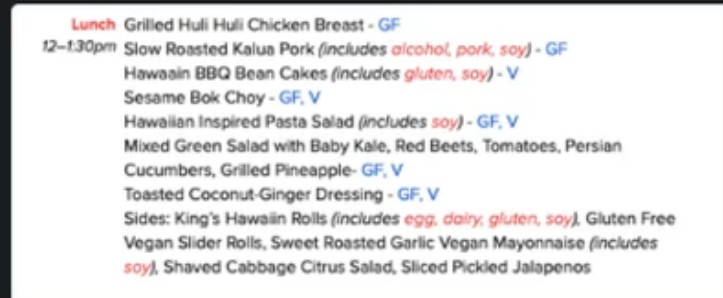
Allie 12:43 PM

@sf Calling all women's size 6, 7, 8.5, and 10! We need a few more people to try on our Reknit Day Skimmer. Head to the SHACC area & come take our survey. We really appreciate your help!

katrina 1:19 PM

We made it! Happy Friday everyone!! Here is what's on today's lunch menu.

Screen Shot 2019-12-13 at 10.17.58 AM.png ▾



“There’s a second-class status with CX and Retail within Everlane that runs counter to the values they espouse, compared to people in the San Francisco office,” a customer-experience employee based in New York told us.

Customer-experience employees can only legally work in a small handful of states, where they report to “point people,” a term for a pseudo-managerial role. “They’re not called managers and don’t have managerial training,” one customer-experience employee tells us, “but are de facto managers.” The company warns in their onboarding materials that moving to a different state could mean part-time employees lose their jobs.

## Travel & Location

### Location, & long-term travel

Part-time CX employment opportunities currently exist in the following states:

- California
- Colorado
- Florida
- Illinois
- Kansas
- North Carolina
- New Jersey
- New York
- Oregon
- Pennsylvania
- Tennessee
- Virginia

- Additional hiring locations might open over time as retail presences appear in additional states. Until such a time, however, Part-time CX Members must permanently reside in and file their taxes in one of the states listed above. - Should you choose to move to a state that does not offer employment opportunities while working for Everlane, please reach out to your Point Person to let them know. Pending our opportunities for employment in that state, termination may occur at the time of the move.

The customer-experience workers say they have deliberately planned to announce their union drive shortly before Christmas; their workload is at its height, one told us, with more than 1,000 open “tickets” from customers needing various kinds of support. They’ll work alongside temporary holiday workers Everlane hires from the staffing company Atrium, who make \$18 an hour, higher than the regular customer experience employees’ pay rate, per a paystub screenshot provided by the organizers to VICE.

The organizers also say they were “strongly discouraged” from taking time off at Christmas, meaning the majority of the 65-person team will be at work on a day when much of the American working public is not. (“That’s what everyone else is doing at home with their families while we’re sneaking away with our laptops to work for three hours,” one employee told us.) And they’ll do it on their own computers, since Everlane doesn’t provide those.

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“We all live in fear of our computers dying,” a customer-experience employee based in New York told us. “They give us \$65 a month as a stipend for equipment. That’s not how much computers cost.”

The meager benefits are surprising, given that Everlane had a \$250 million valuation in 2016, according to Recode, and reportedly hit \$100 million in revenue the same year. That cash was stacked on an unassuming foundation: sensible loafers, \$100 cashmere sweaters, and simple button-down shirts beloved and heavily featured in places like The Strategist. Since they launched in 2010, the company and CEO Michael Presyman have always focused heavily on virtue in both the supply chain—touting their “ethical factories,” for instance, though watchdogs say they could do better—and in their materials, announcing a new line in 2018 partly made from recycled plastics. And transparency is an often-repeated buzzword; the company runs a popular “Choose What You Pay” sale each year, promising, “We choose the products. You choose the price. We reveal where every penny goes.” If customers choose to pay a higher price, for instance, some of that money goes towards “overhead for our team,” the company says.

***Do you work at Everlane, or know anything we should know? Contact Anna Merlan at [anna.merlan@vice.com](mailto:anna.merlan@vice.com) or via VICE's SecureDrop.***

“It’s the affinity,” CEO Michael Presyman told BuzzFeed News in 2015, about why a customer might choose to pay more than the minimum. “If you’re honest and transparent with people, then they’ll sort of treat you with decency in return.”

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Which makes it all the more surprising that the conditions of their customer service employees have, until now, been so opaque. If you’ve ever contacted Everlane—if a sweater didn’t fit or a package got lost—odds are that you spoke to a part-time, remote customer-experience employee. “Part-time remote workers are doing the bulk of the work in answering customer concerns,” one customer-experience employee who works remotely on the East Coast told us. (All of the workers VICE spoke to for this piece requested anonymity, citing a fear of reprisal from management if they were identified as belonging to the group trying to unionize Everlane. Firing or retaliating against unionizing workers is illegal, and there’s no indication Everlane would do that, but the union-busting emails do suggest they disapprove of the idea. Everlane didn’t immediately respond to a request for comment about whether they think a union is right for their workers.)

“We have an international team that tracks down international packages and deals with tariffs and duties,” the East Coast employee said. “There’s a fraud squad that tracks down and handles fraudulent orders. There’s a transparency team. It’s a lot more nuanced than answering someone’s ticket about jeans. Our interactions with customers are much more nuanced than giving simple size advice or ameliorating an order that arrived damaged. It’s especially about the whole experience the customer is having. We’re more like brand ambassadors. And all these people are part-time workers.” Each individual team is small; in total, the Customer Experience department is about 67 people currently. The team is overwhelmingly made up of women; 53 of them versus just 14 men.

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Who would do such a complex job part-time, for a base rate of \$16 an hour? The job attracts a lot of artists and actors, even though the process of getting hired is rigorous: Some of the customer-experience employees sat through four to six rounds of interviews to land their part-time gig.

“The attraction was that you can work as many hours as you want,” a customer-experience worker based in Los Angeles told us. “Like if you’re an artist who sometimes needs extra side money.”

It can be lonely work, the East Coast employee said. “The very way our job is structured keeps us siloed and atomized,” they told us. “If I’m on a morning shift and you’re on an evening shift, we’re ships in the night. There’s no reason to speak to each other or share concerns or realize we both have a terrible need for health insurance and 401k matching.”

But the customer-experience employees did eventually start to talk among themselves. In the last year, they created a private Slack room to be able to talk about handling their taxes, always a difficult task for part-time and remote employees.

“We got together and realized changes being rolled out are changing the landscape of our job,” the East Coast employee told us.

The main change, the workers say, was a move by Everlane in October 2018 to shift all of the remote customer-service employees from contractors into part-time employees. While that initially seemed like good news, all six organizers told us, it wasn’t: The workers went from being able to work a maximum of 39 hours a week to 29. (Both numbers are under the legal minimum, 40 hours, that would require Everlane to count them as full-time and provide things like health insurance.) They’d once been able to schedule shifts freely and work split shifts to accommodate the other things in their lives: family, school, auditions, the second and third jobs they all have to work to make ends meet. That, too, became impossible. And in February 2019, several people told us, the company rolled out a “strike system” for punishing employees.

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“It’s this half-baked Google doc laying out these new rules and conditions for our employment and roles,” the East Coast employee said. “It laid out that we’re going to have a strike system in place so if you miss your shift or if you’re late past a certain number of minutes you’ll get a strike and if you’ll get too many it could be grounds for firing. But they said they didn’t want to give the exact number of strikes because they wanted to stay ‘open.’” (Eventually the number of strikes turned out to be three, after which the employee would likely be fired, the workers say.)

“It felt like deliberately vague language,” the East Coast employee said. “It felt like we were meant to play by rules we didn’t fully understand. We didn’t feel the people who’d written these fully understood them either, for that matter.”

Gradually, the remote employees’ Slack room—dubbed the Room of Requirement, a Harry Potter reference—started to turn into a space to share concerns and create an action plan, which was collectively written up in an anonymous Google document. At an all-staff meeting in March, a customer-experience employee brought up that list of concerns and things they’d like to see, including more flexible scheduling and paid time off—currently, the customer-experience employees have sick days, but no other paid time off.

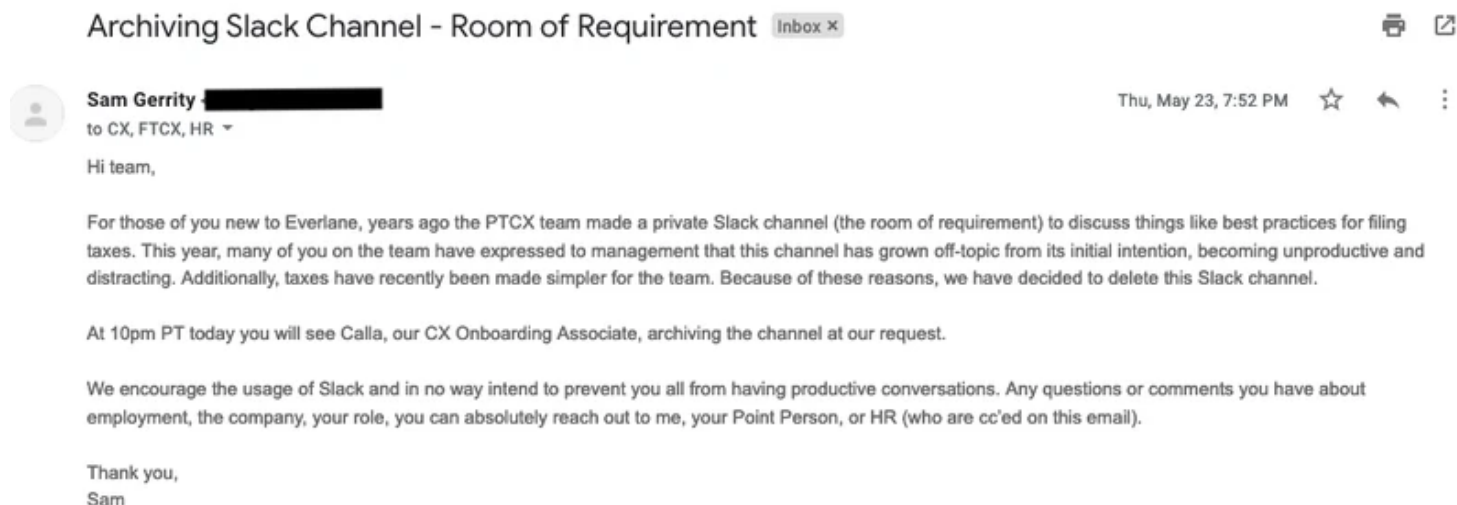
Management seemed “blindsided” by the requests in the document, the East Coast employee told us. “But there was no real change.”

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Well, there was one: The Slack room where the remote employees had gathered was shut down in May of this year, about two months after they'd brought their concerns to the all-staff meeting. Samantha Gerrity, then the head of Customer Experience, wrote in a terse email, "Many of you on the team have expressed to management that this channel has grown off-topic from its original intention, becoming unproductive and distracting. Additionally, taxes have recently been made simpler for the team." For those reasons, Gerrity wrote, management decided to delete the Slack; it was closed down two hours later.



## AN EMAIL FROM EVERLANE'S HEAD OF CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE CLOSING THE ROOM OF REQUIREMENT

"That experience of having the channel closed was very galvanizing," the East Coast employee told us. They opened a second, off-site Slack, which they dubbed the West Side Soccer League, and it soon turned into the place where they started to discuss more serious concerns about the company, and, eventually, the prospect of unionizing.

"Many of the part-time CX workers hadn't even spoken much with each other and had only communicated via Slack," said Anne Luck, an organizer with the Communications Workers of America who began working with the Everlane employees. "Once we started engaging on phone and video calls it opened up a whole new world for people in terms of communicating with their coworkers."

Luck said that even in the few months the organizing effort has been going on, she's watched droves of Everlane employees quit, driven away by inflexible scheduling and low pay. (One customer-experience representative told us it's been about 20 people in the last three months out of 60-odd people, though new people have also come on in the same time period. Everlane reportedly has roughly 400 total employees.)

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“Everlane has lost some really great workers because of those things,” she told us.

A former customer-experience worker based in Los Angeles who recently quit agreed. “Their values and their mission, it aligned so perfectly with my views,” she said, “That’s what drew me in to begin with.” When she left the company, she sent out an all-staff email expressing a deep disappointment with what had changed.

“It is the CX team who listens, consoles, and supports our people and ultimately imbues the Everlane culture,” she wrote. “Yet, we are not given the opportunity to earn a fair and livable wage. We are not given any incentives. No benefits. No insurance. Nothing. We are treated as disposable.” In the end, she added, “The very ethos of this company has been lost and that has been the biggest disappointment of all.”

The current workers organizing the union drive say they hope that they’ll be able to get signed union cards from the majority of the customer-experience team, signaling their support for a union, and that when they do, Everlane will voluntarily recognize them.

“Given their values, they should voluntarily recognize our union,” one told us.

In the meantime, the organizing workers say, they don’t think it’s a coincidence that Everlane sent out two emails discouraging unionization just before they planned to go public. The same emails from Kelly McLaughlin on the People team, which were cc’ed to CEO Michael Preysman, also promised that the remote employees might soon have the ability to go full-time.

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That’s an attractive idea to some of them, another customer-experience employee based in New York told us. “I want a pathway to working full-time. It’s one of the big ones. I’d rather work one job than several different jobs. And benefits, especially healthcare. I got lucky this year that I could find a plan I could afford, but I don’t know if next year it’ll be possible.” But the email, they said, “Felt condescending, and like they were spreading false or misleading information about unions. They’d never brought up a pathway to full time employment before. They’d previously said the only full time jobs were in San Francisco.”

“We want to do right by you to create a better future and know we can do this by working directly together to solve any issues,” McLaughlin wrote. “Based on what I’ve heard, I hope our existing plan—which we’ve now shared with you—addresses many of the concerns.”

The second email from her counseled that, when it comes to a union, “We suggest waiting and not rushing. My recommendation is that you hold off on signing anything until you can gather the facts you need and fully understand how this may impact you individually. We are available to answer your questions and want to make sure you are fully informed about what it could mean to have a union at Everlane.”

The customer-experience employees said that McLaughlin also called and texted each of them individually between the first and second email. They may have had a backfire effect, the New York employee said.

“Everyone saw them as quite condescending and clearly in response to our unionization,” they said. “It’s not coming from a genuine place. Otherwise it would have happened months ago.”

“I want to believe in Everlane’s mission statement and their ethos but it’s hard from what I’ve seen and experienced with the company thus far,” a customer-experience employee based in Florida told us. “I hope changes can be implemented in the future to ensure the company stays true to their promises, not only to us as employees but to their consumer base as well.”

Everlane’s press team didn’t immediately respond to a request for comment from VICE.

**UPDATE: 3:35 PM, 12/20:** Everlane issued a comment to VICE after this story was published:

*We believe in transparency and the right of all of our employees to be heard. We missed the mark in this instance, and regret that. We need to do a better job communicating with our remote team and offering them more opportunities. We are working quickly to improve their experience, including offering full-time roles and creating a clearer path for continued conversation. We're working to do better.*

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