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By STEVEN GREENHOUSE

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Workers have sued Family Dollar and Pep Boys, the auto parts and repair chain, accusing managers of deleting hours. A jury found that Taco Bell managers in Oregon had routinely erased workers' time. More than a dozen former Wal-Mart employees said in interviews and depositions that managers had altered time records to shortchange employees. The Department of Labor recently reached two back-pay settlements with Kinko's photocopy centers, totaling \$56,600, after finding that managers in Ithaca, N.Y., and Hyannis, Mass., had erased time for 13 employees.

"There are a lot of incentives for store managers to cut costs in illegal ways," said David Lewin, a professor of management who teaches a course on compensation at the University of California, Los Angeles. "You hope that would be contrary to company practices, but sometimes these practices become so ingrained that they become the dominant practice."

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instances of managers doing the wrong thing. Our policy is if a manager deliberately deletes time, they're dismissed."

Compensation experts say that many managers, whether at discount stores or fast-food restaurants, fear losing their jobs if they fail to keep costs down.

"A lot of this is that district managers might fire you as soon as look at you," said William Rutzick, a lawyer who reached a \$1.5 million settlement with Taco Bell last year after a jury found the chain's managers guilty of erasing time and requiring off-the-clock work. "The store managers have a toehold in the lower middle class. They're being paid \$20,000, \$30,000. They're in management. They get medical. They have no job security at all, and they want to keep their toehold in the lower middle class, and they'll often do whatever is necessary to do it."

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After leaving Toys "R" Us and Family Dollar, Mr. Pooters moved to Indiana and took a job as an account manager with Rentway, a chain that leases furniture and electronics. There, he and a co-worker, William Coombs, said, the workload was so intense that they typically missed four lunch breaks a week. Nonetheless, they said, their manager inserted a half-hour for lunch into their time records every day, reducing their pay accordingly.

"They told us to sign the payroll printouts to confirm it was right," Mr. Pooters said, describing a confrontation last November. "When we protested about what happened with our lunch hours, the manager said, 'If you don't sign, you're not going to get paid.'"

Mr. Coombs said: "They removed our lunch hours all the time. We were told if we didn't sign the payroll sheets, we'd be terminated."

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Kim Danner said that when she ran a Family Dollar store with eight employees in Minneapolis, her district manager urged her to erase hours so that she never paid overtime or exceeded her allotted payroll. Federal law generally requires paying time-and-a-half to nonmanagerial employees who work more than 40 hours a week.

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So she altered clock-out times and inserted half-hour lunch breaks even when employees had worked through them. "I felt horrible that I was doing this," she said. "I felt pressured, absolutely. If I refused, I would have been terminated easily."

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At first, she bowed to orders and erased hours. Some employees began asking questions, she said, but they refused to confront management. "They took it lying down," she said. "They didn't want to lose their job. Jobs are hard to find."

When she started feeling guilty and confronted her district manager, she said, "It all came to a boil. He fired me."

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