



We, The Graduate and Professional Student Senate at Virginia Tech, condemn all unfair labor practices, wage theft, and intimidation of student workers.

It has come to our attention that BookHolders, a local textbook retailer, has been accused of engaging in several alarming labor practices. We would like to alert the student body to these allegations.

According to current and former student employees, BookHolders is illegally paying employees below the Virginia minimum wage of \$11/hr, despite being reprimanded for doing so in multiple Virginia Department of Labor and Industry (DOLI) investigations (1). Student employees have also alleged that John Verde, the owner and CEO of BookHolders, frequently withheld entire paychecks, paying no wages for time worked (2). According to legal filings, after John Verde discovered that three students working at the Blacksburg BookHolders location had filed wage claims against him, he retaliated against them by threatening them, firing one student, effectively firing another, and suing all three students (3).

Many Blacksburg businesses including the university have moved to pay employees a \$15/hr minimum wage in line with the cost of living and labor demands for the area. Although it is unfortunate that a business feels the need to pay under this, it is especially egregious to pay less than the Virginia minimum wage with full knowledge that this practice is illegal. We have reason to believe that this mistreatment of student workers is not isolated to Blacksburg. BookHolders has locations near other universities, and two other lawsuits have been filed by students employed at the West Virginia University and College Park BookHolders locations, claiming they too were not paid the minimum wage for West Virginia and Maryland (6,7).

As a condition of employment, BookHolders makes student employees sign an arbitration agreement that limits legal recourse for wage theft, harassment, and other unfair labor practices. In this agreement, which is written in dense legal language, students agree to resolve "any disputes" through arbitration, and pay half the arbitrator's fee, which BookHolders gets to select (2). Arbitration happens in another state, and BookHolders is not bound by the agreement – so they can sue their employees. This contract is presented as a standard onboarding form to sign, and a non-negotiable part of starting the job. Making all employees sign a contract promising to resolve disputes through arbitration just so you can systematically steal from them later without accountability is beyond an abhorrent business practice: it is a scam. This arbitration agreement was the basis John Verde used to sue Virginia Tech students for reporting his crimes to state authorities.

These legal battles are currently under dispute and the students are well represented, but we the student government bodies of Virginia Tech are calling on John Verde to drop his baseless lawsuits, to stop arbitrarily withholding paychecks, and to immediately begin paying his employees the Virginia minimum wage.

Until BookHolders addresses the harm it has committed and makes amends to students who have been sued and fired, we are urging all students to purchase their books from other retailers. We advise the student body to avoid working for BookHolders while they continue to mistreat their employees.

Finally, we call on the Virginia Department of Labor and Industry to open an expanded investigation into BookHolders' wage theft, and to secure back pay for all Virginia student workers whose wages have been stolen.

We are horrified and appalled at the treatment that these three Virginia Tech students have faced, and we thank these students for standing up to John Verde's and BookHolders' scam. Your courage and persistence will keep future Virginia Tech students safe from fraud and mistreatment at the hands of corrupt business owners.

- 1) Commonwealth of Virginia Department of Labor and Industry Determination Letter (Appendix E)
<https://www.publicjustice.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/App.-1-Riley-DeHority-BookHolders-aff.-10.20.22-FINAL-SIGNED-1.pdf>
- 2) Public Justice: BookHolders v. DeHority et al. Case Brief
https://www.publicjustice.net/case_brief/bookholders-v-dehority-et-al/
- 3) Public Justice: "Virginia Tech Students Fight Lawsuit After Reporting Illegal Wage Theft" <https://www.publicjustice.net/virginia-tech-students-fight-lawsuit-after-reporting-illegal-wage-theft/>
- 4) Code of Virginia § 40.1-29. Pay; Assignment of Wages; Sale of Merchandise to Employees. <https://law.lis.virginia.gov/vacodefull/title40.1/chapter3/article2/>
- 5) Code of Virginia § 40.1-28.9. Definitions.
<https://law.lis.virginia.gov/vacode/title40.1/chapter3/section40.1-28.9/>
- 6) Pazulski v. BookHolders, LLC, et al., No. C-02-CV-21-001258 (Md. Cir. Ct. Jan. 11, 2022)
- 7) Knott v. BookHolders, LLC, et al., No. 1:20-CV-00057-IMK (N.D. W. Va. Sept. 30, 2020)