

# Workers protest low wages at New York City fast-food restaurants

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Hundreds of fast-food workers and their supporters protested against low wages and lack of benefits such as healthcare at several McDonald's and Burger King restaurants in New York City on Thursday and Friday.

Most morning-shift workers at a McDonald's on Madison Ave. in Manhattan did not report for work, and organizers have said that over 200 fast-food workers elected to stay home citywide on Thursday. Protesters picketed at Burger King on 34<sup>th</sup> St., also in Manhattan. Another group of protesters stood outside of a McDonald's on 42<sup>nd</sup> St. near Times Sq.

On Friday, protesters shut down a Wendy's in Fulton Mall in Brooklyn after a worker was fired for striking. Fulton Mall is a predominantly working-class shopping area filled with fast-food establishments. Many passers-by joined in the protest.

Workers at McDonald's, Burger King, Wendy's, Taco Bell and similar establishments are some of the most exploited in New York City. Many positions start at \$7.25 an hour and seldom see wages rise above \$9.00 an hour. Few fast-food chains offer health insurance or other benefits to their workers.

One protester in Manhattan, Pamela Waldron, told the media, "I qualify for food stamps but my husband doesn't want me to use them. There are other people who need them more who don't even have jobs." Another worker, Saavedra Jantuah, was quoted as saying, "I make \$7.25 an hour and that's barely enough to live on."

Over 50,000 people work in New York's fast-food industry. Often these are the only jobs available to workers, especially youth, in a city with over 9 percent unemployment. Over one million workers—a third of the workforce—earn less than \$11.75 an hour. Twenty-one percent of New York City's population meets the official poverty guidelines, and the city's homeless

shelters now accommodate a record 47,000 people, including 20,000 children. That figure is expected to rise substantially in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy.

Fast-food restaurants are part of a \$200 billion-dollar industry that pays its CEOs astronomical amounts in salaries, bonuses and stock options. The 2012 compensation for David Novak, CEO of Yum! Brands, which owns Pizza Hut and Taco Bell, was \$29.4 million, or over 4,300 times as much as the pay of an average employee. In 2011, after four months on the job, Wendy's CEO Emil Brolick earned \$4.6 million. Jim Skinner, McDonald's outgoing CEO, is slated to receive about \$10 million by the end of the year.

The extreme inequality and worsening living conditions for masses of people in New York have created explosive conditions in the city.

The protests this week was organized by Fast Food Forward, a coalition that includes religious organizations and liberal pressure groups such as New York Communities for Change (the successor to ACORN) and the Black Institute as well as the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). The stated goals of the coalition are to unionize the workers and raise workers' wages to \$15 an hour.

The Fast Food Forward protest comes on top of similar actions at Walmart stores across the country on Black Friday. The Walmart protests were part of an attempt to unionize the company's low-wage workers (who make an average of \$8.81 an hour) by United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW).

Some of these same organizations led an effort to unionize workers at New York City car washes earlier this year.

Extreme social inequality and the rapid increase of poverty have created concern among the upper middle-class layers around the Democratic Party. The political

aim behind the New York fast-food protests, similar to the Walmart protests, is to smother a social explosion before it happens with militant-sounding rhetoric on the one hand and slavish support for the Obama administration on the other.

On Tuesday, at an organizational meeting of a number of these groups active in protests, “emphasized that a vote for the Democrats was a vote for change and progress for all ...”

The unions themselves play a key role in suffocating dissent. Their job is to isolate and weaken any spontaneous struggles by sections of the working class. The SEIU was one of the biggest contributors to the 2012 campaign for the re-election of Obama, whose economic policies promote low wages as a means of making the US economy more “competitive” and attracting corporations that have moved production to China, Mexico and elsewhere to reduce labor costs.

Several mayoral hopefuls, including City Council Speaker Christine Quinn and Public Advocate Bill de Blasio, have endorsed the protests. At least five Democratic members of the City Council were also present at the protest at a Wendy’s in Brooklyn on Friday. The attempt to align these protests with the Democratic Party, a principal political instrument of corporate America, precludes a genuine struggle to fundamentally change the exploitation of the most oppressed layers of the city’s population.

The author recommends:

The “Black Friday” protests at Wallmart  
[22 November 2012]



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