

Chicago food service and retail workers protest low wages

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Early Wednesday morning, downtown Chicago retail and fast food workers walked off the job, following the example of some fast food workers in New York, who went on a one-day walkout in November and again at the beginning of this month.

Around 500 workers from McDonalds, Dunkin' Donuts, Protein Bar, Sears, Nike, Victoria's Secret and other stores took part in the protest. They were organized around the Fight for 15 campaign of the Service Employees International Union's Workers Organizing Committee of Chicago, and supported by Action Now (formerly ACORN), along with other Democratic Party-affiliated groups and religious organizations. Workers marched to demand a pay increase to \$15 per hour or better, the ability to unionize and safer working conditions.

"They keep adding more and more tasks and giving us less and less," said Krista, an employee at Nordstrom Rack. Krista explained that the company has been decreasing the number of people for certain tasks, such as closing the store. This used to be done by twelve people, but is now done by only four.

Among the workers involved, there is a desire to fight against poverty-level pay and extreme exploitation ubiquitous in the service industry. For the SEIU, however, the campaign is one in a series of actions aimed at boosting its own position and dues income. In exchange for bringing in the union, the SEIU offers strict control over a disaffected and exploited workforce. The proposed pay rises are a means of capturing worker interest, not a serious demand of the union upon recognition.

The SEIU and other unions are committed to their political alliance with the Democratic Party and the Obama administration, which is spearheading the nationwide assault on wages and working conditions.

Retail and fast food jobs have traditionally been considered to be "entry-level" positions in which teenagers receive their first work experiences. However, that has changed dramatically, especially since the 2008 financial crisis, according to the National Employment Law Project.

The majority of jobs cut since the crisis have been middle-wage jobs—where workers earned between \$13.84 and \$21.13 per hour. The majority of jobs created since the 2008 crisis have been low wage jobs, where workers earn between \$7.69 and \$13.83 per hour.

As a result, many more college graduates and older workers are applying for service jobs. The Bureau of Labor Statistics published data for 2012 listing the three largest occupations in the US economy as retail salesperson, cashier and "food preparation and serving worker, including fast food."

Aimee Crawford, 56, said she has worked for 14 months at a downtown Protein Bar restaurant for \$8.75 an hour.

"I'm using my retirement funds and my savings to bridge the gap between what I bring home and what I need to survive," Crawford said.

In New York earlier this month, 400 workers from five dozen restaurants walked off of the job, demanding an increase in pay to \$15 per hour and better living conditions. The turnout was twice as large as the walkouts in November. So far nobody has permanently lost his or her job over the actions.



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