

Unions, ministers organize protest in Detroit over fast-food worker pay

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Fast-food workers in Detroit joined a series of strikes and protests Friday outside various chain restaurants in the city to draw attention to the conditions they face. Among the chains picketed were McDonalds, Wendy's, Long John Silver's and Popeye's chicken.

The protests were organized by Reverend Al Sharpton's National Action Network (NAN), the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) and Good Jobs Now, a coalition of community, labor and religious organizations.

The protests in Detroit follow similar events in St Louis, Chicago and New York. They raise the demand for a wage increase to \$15 an hour and the right of fast-food workers to form unions.

Organizers called the protest a major success, claiming that up to 400 workers from 60 restaurants participated in the various actions and that several fast-food restaurants were shut down. In any event, a large portion of those participating in the pickets were not fast-food workers, but members of the SEIU and UFCW who were bused in from out of town.

There are some 53,000 fast-food workers in the Detroit area, and most earn little more than the state minimum wage of \$7.40 an hour. There are now about twice as many fast-food workers as there are auto workers in the metro Detroit area (population 3.7 million).

Low-wage service jobs now form the bulk of employment in Detroit, the poorest big city in America. Fast-food workers are among the most exploited workers in the United States. They not only face low wages, but lack of benefits, irregular hours and the constant threat of dismissal.

The bulk of new jobs being created during the so-called recovery are low-wage service positions or

temporary and part-time jobs. Meanwhile, the number of Americans with part-time jobs who want full-time work is on the rise.

The WSWS spoke to several workers picketing the Popeye's chicken near Grand River and Fenkell on the west side of Detroit. April Jones, a worker at McDonalds, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "I am here to fight for my rights. Me and my baby can't live on \$7.40 per hour. There are no benefits. It is hard when you have to pay bills, and I have a one-year-old, so it is not going to get easier.

"With my check I just barely make it through to the end of the week and that is it.

"The managers treat us like nothing, like they don't need us. It is horrible. They hire and fire a lot of people. We are putting in a lot of extra work, but they don't want to pay anything out."

Wontika, a worker at Popeye's, told us, "We need wages to increase. It is very frustrating. We have to work hard for little pay. I am here because I am not making enough to survive for me and my family.

"I can't get a car because they are cutting our hours. I have been here a year and one-half, almost two years. I have tried looking for better work, but it is hard without a car.

"I help support my mother and my little sister. It is a struggle to try to stretch the dollars to the next paycheck. I work hard and I deserve more money.

"I am still paying for school. I was in a car accident, so I had to stop going because I couldn't pay for it. It is kind of hard to pay the bills."

Wontika spoke about the emergency manager recently brought in as a financial dictator over the city of Detroit. "It is going to be even harder now. People will have to get two jobs in order to have enough money to put clothes on our backs and shoes on our

feet.”

At a rally held later in the day in midtown Detroit, Crystal, a Wendy’s worker, told the WSWs: “I feel we do need a raise. I have worked for three years and only make \$8.10 an hour and we have to put up with the managers.

“I say if you want hard work, pay for hard work. What can you do with the money we make? The price of gas is so high, food is so high.”

Despite the determination of fast-food workers to fight to improve their conditions, the protest organizers offered no perspective to carry the struggle forward. At the rally held at the conclusion of the protest, Reverend W.J. Rideout of the Good Jobs Now coalition called on those assembled to appeal to the consciences of the CEOs of the fast-food chains to raise workers wages. The rally ended with a prayer calling on Jesus to intercede on behalf of low-wage workers.

For their part, the SEIU and UFCW view fast-food workers as an enormous pool of potential dues-paying members. However, union officials feel themselves so isolated and discredited they chose to keep a low profile at the rally.

Fast-food workers are well advised to steer clear of the unions, who have carried out one cynical betrayal after another of their members. After months of encouraging Wal-Mart workers to risk their jobs by joining protests over low wages and poor working conditions, the UFCW abruptly pulled out of the campaign, leaving workers in the lurch. The climb down by the UFCW came in the wake of an unfair labor practice complaint by the retail giant alleging a relatively minor infraction of the National Labor Relations Act.

A successful struggle against the appalling conditions faced by fast-food workers must be waged independently of the unions and the Democratic Party, and the preachers who prop them up. This requires the construction of new rank-and-file based organizations based on a socialist perspective.



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