

Fast-food workers mount protests across the US

Marcus Day
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Fast-food workers staged protests, including brief strikes, in roughly 60 US cities on Thursday, including Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, Boston, Detroit, Atlanta and Memphis. Major chains McDonald's, Burger King, Wendy's, Taco Bell and KFC were affected. The workers, many of whom are at the brink of an economic abyss, are demanding an increase in wages to \$15 per hour.

Fast-food workers, and workers in the food service industry more generally, are among the most exploited in the country, receiving miserable pay and few, if any, benefits. Though still relatively limited in scope, this was reportedly the largest fast-food workers strike since the start of the campaign for higher wages in November 2012.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the typical food preparation worker makes \$9.18 per hour, or \$19,100 a year—assuming they are able to find full-time work. Many, however, are paid only the federal minimum wage of \$7.25 per hour. In either case, the amount falls below the poverty limit for a family of three. Many workers attempting to support a family are forced to work 50, 60 or even 70 hours per week at multiple jobs in order to get by.

Meanwhile, many of the executives in the \$200 billion dollar fast-food industry make more in a *single day* than their workers do in an entire year. David Novak, CEO of Yum! Brands, a Fortune 500 company that owns the Pizza Hut and Taco Bell chains, received \$29.4 million in compensation in 2012—which translates to an “hourly wage” of \$14,134, roughly 2,000 times the federal minimum wage.

Shaniqua Davis, a 20-year-old McDonald's worker in the Bronx who makes the minimum wage, told *Agence France-Press* at a demonstration on Fifth Avenue, “They make millions that come from our feet. They can

afford to pay us better.”

Davis, who has a one-year-old child, continued, “It's really hard... I have bills to pay. I need to buy diapers. I can hardly buy food.” When asked if she worked full-time, she responded, “Forty? Never. They refuse to let you get that [many] hours.”

Davis said that if it weren't for food stamps and rent assistance, “I would already be on the street.”

According to *Time* magazine, while profit margins for privately held fast-food companies have more than doubled since 2009, from 2.1 percent to 4.6 percent, the percentage of revenue spent on payroll has decreased, from 23.5 percent to 22.9 percent.

Although fast-food jobs and other service industry jobs have increasingly replaced those in the manufacturing sector over the last several decades, the trend has grown dramatically since the onset of the recession in 2007-2008. Close to 60 percent of jobs added during the so-called economic recovery have been low-paying service industry positions; most of those have been part-time.

At the same time, sustained high unemployment has meant the creation of a “reserve army” of workers desperate for a job, which employers have used to force down wages and thus boost profits. In 2011, when McDonald's announced it would be creating roughly 50,000 positions, the company received more than 1 million applications. In the end, it hired approximately six out of every 100 that applied.

Groups in and around the Democratic Party have sought both to deflect and take advantage of the rapidly growing bitterness and desperation of food service and retail workers, who have not been traditionally unionized in the US. A number of one-day strikes and protests have been organized since November 2012 by service unions, like the Service Employees

International Union (SEIU), which has provided financial support and played the guiding role, and a collection of community organizations and religious groups.

Figures such as New York City mayoral candidate and current City Council Speaker Christine Quinn, a Democrat, have attempted to portray themselves as supporters of the fast-food workers' demands. Quinn joined a protest in midtown Manhattan on Thursday and stated that the fast-food industry must recognize workers' right to unionize.

But far from working to improve the position of the deeply exploited workers, the politicians and unions involved, including the SEIU and the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), hope to keep their discontent within the "safe" channels of the Democratic Party. Service worker unions involved in organizing the actions are poised to become the bargaining agents for these workers.

Kendall Fells, president of the newly created Fast Food Workers Committee in New York, told the *Wall Street Journal*, "Fast-food workers need a union and we're proud to help them get it started." Fells, for his part, took in \$111,000 as a city coordinator for the SEIU last year.

Mary Kay Henry, president of the SEIU, wrote in a piece for the *Huffington Post* on Tuesday, "We need to ensure that workers collectively act to raise their voices on the job to raise wages and improve their lives through bargaining."

What Quinn, Fells, Henry and others are really saying is that fast-food workers should accept the authority of a union and its bankrupt policy of "labor-management partnership," which has overseen the decimation of wages and benefits in every other industry throughout the country over the last 30 years.

The SEIU has participated just as willingly as the United Auto Workers, the American Federation of Teachers and other unions in imposing cuts to wages and benefits on its members. In California, to give but one example, the SEIU has supported Democratic Governor Jerry Brown's attacks on pensions, public health care programs such as Medi-Cal, and public education (see "SEIU union leader convicted on federal charges").

Union bureaucrats such as Henry, who have six-figure salaries and bloated expense accounts, represent

an upper-middle-class social layer that is irrevocably bound to the Democratic Party and the capitalist system. The SEIU has been one of the most enthusiastic supporters of President Obama, donating millions to his campaigns, even as he has led the assault on wages, jobs and social programs.

The unions are fundamentally hostile to the needs and social interests of their members. Above all, they fear an eruption of a mass movement of workers outside their control and in opposition to the present political and economic system.



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