

Hundreds arrested at union-organized fast-food protests across the US

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6 September 2014

Hundreds were arrested in demonstrations organized by the trade unions and held in about 150 cities across the US on Thursday, centered on the call for a \$15 an hour minimum wage and other improvements.

The civil disobedience actions, conducted in the name of Fast Food Forward and involving sit-downs and similar actions, represents an escalation of the public relations campaign that was begun about two years ago by the Service International Employees Union (SEIU) and other unions, in close coordination with sections of the Democratic Party establishment and various liberal and pseudo-left organizations.

Millions of workers at fast food restaurants and in similar industries endure poverty wages and mistreatment, forced to rely on food stamps in an attempt to feed their families. The federal hourly minimum wage of \$7.25 has not been raised since 2009 and in real terms remains at its lowest level in decades. Fast food workers have reacted with growing anger to the conditions they face, as bankers and hedge fund managers add to their colossal fortunes and the stock market sets new records.

The union officials seek to latch onto the legitimate grievances and growing outrage among workers, but only in order to ensure that it remains tied to the Democratic Party and does not threaten the rule of big business.

Among the cities involved in Thursday's actions—in addition to New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Detroit and other major centers—were Tucson, Arizona, Durham, North Carolina, Rochester, NY and dozens of others. Arrests took place in New York City's Times Square as well as in Detroit, San Diego, Miami, Denver, Kansas City and elsewhere.

As in the half-dozen previous demonstrations over the past two years, the participants included a mixture of fast food workers as well as supporters and union personnel. The SEIU has spent millions of dollars on publicity and organizers for the protests. This time the union called on

home care workers, many of whom are organized by the SEIU, to join the actions. While the demonstrations and strikes did not appear to interrupt business, many fast food workers, seeking a means of struggle against the exploitation they face daily, took part.

Fast food workers' grievances are many, in addition to the urgent need for decent wages. Many immigrant workers are abused and threatened by supervisors. Workers report late paychecks, broken equipment, and unpredictable and unfair scheduling that makes it difficult if not impossible to arrange child care or to juggle other jobs.

Only last week one fast-food worker, Maria Fernandes, died while napping in her car in New Jersey in between shifts at three separate Dunkin' Donuts restaurants.

The union-organized campaign is not designed to and will not achieve the minimal needs of the millions of exploited fast food and other low-paid workers, however. As figures demonstrate, even a \$15 an hour wage would not lift the average family out of poverty.

Securing the basic economic and social rights of fast food workers can be achieved as part of a political struggle against the super-rich and all of their representatives.

The main purpose of the current campaign is two-fold: to increase the number of dues-paying members in the unions to protect the privileges and the political bargaining power of their officials, and above all in the most immediate sense to help the Democrats mobilize voters in the mid-term elections taking place in November of this year.

The alliance between the Obama administration and the unions is an alliance against the working class. Pointing to the ferocious assaults spearheaded by the Republican Party on the state and federal level, the unions peddle the lie that the Democrats will provide reforms.

The record of the past two decades, including both the

Clinton and Obama administrations, proves just the opposite. Inequality has skyrocketed, under Democrats and Republicans alike.

The coordination between the White House and the unions was vividly displayed by Obama's Labor Day address just days before the fast food protests. "You know what? If I were looking for a job that lets me build some security for my family, I'd join a union," the president cynically declared in his speech last Monday. "If I were busting my butt in the service industry and wanted an honest day's pay for an honest day's work, I'd join a union."

This multimillionaire representative of Wall Street at the same time sang the praises of the stock market and its relentless rise. Significantly, he emphasized the importance of union membership, not the rise in the minimum wage. In fact the administration is calling only for a small increase in the minimum, far below even the inadequate \$15 figure.

Just as operatives like Al Sharpton are seeking to use the issue of police killings in Ferguson, Missouri and elsewhere to call for an increase in the turnout at the voting booth for Democratic big business candidates, so unions like the SEIU are carefully scheduling their "protests" for the same purpose.

"The fast food workers have captured the imagination of the nation," said Mary Kay Henry, the president of the SEIU, this week. This is a dishonest attempt to turn the justifiably angry fast food workers into campaigners for the same politicians who have presided over growing inequality.

The genuine demands of fast food workers for decent living standards and conditions can only be achieved through a struggle that is conducted independently of and in opposition to the unions and the Democratic Party. Above all a political strategy is needed to mobilize millions of workers in a united struggle against capitalism.



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