Unions organize pro-Democratic Party protests over low wages

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Protest demonstrations against low pay were held in hundreds of cities and on university campuses around the United States Wednesday, in a campaign whose organizers are seeking to help millionaire Democratic Party politicians, not low-wage workers exploited by giant corporations.

The organizers of "Fight for $15," funded by the Services Employees International Union and other trade unions, claimed that there were protests in 226 cities in the US and outside of fast food restaurants owned by US corporations in many foreign countries.

Given the size of the demonstrations in the largest cities—several thousand in New York City and about a thousand in Los Angeles—it is likely that as many as 20,000 people participated nationwide. These would have been divided between full-time union officials and workers drawn from industries long afflicted by low wages, including fast food, home health, nursing homes and retail sales.

In Detroit, for example, demonstrators assembled near Wayne State University, held a rally on the campus, then moved on to picket a nearby McDonald's restaurant. Those in attendance including SEIU and United Auto Workers staff, church groups, and members of pseudo-left organizations that support the union bureaucracy, like the Workers World Party. Of the 500 people participating at its height, there appeared to be about 150 actual low-paid workers, as opposed to the well-paid functionaries of the unions and their middle-class entourage.

The union officials did their best to police the rally to insure that there was no dissent from their pro-Democratic Party line. They told protesters not to speak to the press, and sought to interfere with a *World Socialist Web Site* reporter who was interviewing workers. The workers ignored the attempted gag order and spoke freely.

The protest was conducted in a perfunctory fashion, with chanting of slogans for $15 an hour, a brief appearance by a hip-hop artist and speeches by lower-ranking union officials.

Fast food worker Victoria told the WSWS, "I work at McDonald's. It is terrible. I can't raise a family on $8.50 an hour. The only raise I got was when the minimum wage went up."

Her friend Courtney added, "I work at Uptown Barbeque, and it is not enough money. I have two kids. We can't go out to eat. I can't afford clothes. I get assistance for clothes and food. I am receiving food stamps, and they cut money from that."

Franchaska, another McDonald's worker, said, "Rent is $700 a month. You have to pay lights and gas. I am short a pair of gym shoes right now. We stand on our feet all day. We give our 40 hours like anyone else. I make less than $9."

She spoke about the raise recently announced by McDonald's. "If you already made $8.15 an hour, you got nothing," she said. "And you don't get a raise when you are working for a franchise.

"You pay for your food and uniforms. There are only certain meals you can have, and you have to pay for them. They won't let you take off work. It can be a family emergency—they don't understand."

Her friend Mile said, "We have no dental, vacations, no sick days. They don't want you calling in sick. They cut me off food stamps until I am 21."

Kimani said, "I work at Tim Horton's, and we do not make enough money. I have a baby. It is hard. After paying all my bills there is nothing left.

"The rich are keeping all the money, but there still needs to be a working class. There are thousands dying all over the world from hunger. Some nights I have no

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food at home and end up eating ramen noodles."

Wednesday's event was the latest in a series of such days of protest, which began in 2012 as an effort by the unions to refurbish their public image by borrowing some of the tactics—and hiring some of the organizers—of the Occupy Wall Street protests of 2011-2012. Initially, the protests were targeted at fast food restaurants, although there were separate days of protest outside Wal-Mart stores.

This year's protests seemed to have expanded somewhat from earlier events, although not by attracting larger numbers of fast food workers. Instead, workers were mobilized from already unionized low-wage occupations, including home health aides and nursing home staff.

A genuine movement to raise the wages of workers making less than $15 an hour would appeal to tens of millions of people, since a colossal 42 percent of all US workers make less than that figure, according to a report by the National Employment Law Project. The report also found that six of the ten occupations most likely to add jobs in the next few years paid median hourly wages of less than $15: retail sales, food preparation and service, freight and stock, janitors, nursing assistants, and home care.

A full-time worker making $15 an hour would make $30,000 a year before taxes, barely above the US poverty line for a family of four, and well below what is needed to live decently in any major US city.

In 2014, there was majority support for raising the minimum wage in all five states that held referendums on the subject. Both corporate America and the Democratic Party have sought to defuse this mass sentiment: the corporations, like McDonald's, Wal-Mart and Target, announcing pay hikes to bring workers "up" to $9 or $10 an hour; the Democrats, by adopting minimum wages above the federal level, as high as $13-$15 an hour, although phased in over many years and with numerous loopholes and exceptions.

The unions, however, are incapable of carrying out any genuine mobilization of the working class. The "Fight for $15" campaign has two interrelated purposes: to recruit additional dues-paying members, thus shoring up the six-figure salaries and perks of the union officialdom; and to hustle votes for Democratic Party candidates in the 2016 elections.

One of the more reactionary features of Wednesday's event was that it was timed for April 15, the deadline for filing income tax returns in the United States. The *New York Times*, citing as its source Kendall Fells, organizing director of Fight for $15, reported that the date was chosen "to focus public attention on the strain that low wages place on public budgets and taxpayers when working families are forced to rely on public assistance."

In other words, far from demanding that social programs should be expanded in order to raise the living standards of the poorest sections of the working class, the unions are making the argument—in tune with the austerity policies being carried out by both the Democratic and Republican parties—that raising wages for the lowest-paid would facilitate further cuts in public spending.

A report issued by New York City Comptroller Scott Stringer, a Democrat, issued Tuesday on the eve of the protests, said that raising wages to $15 an hour would allow a cut of as much as $500 million a year in food stamps and Medicaid.

Low wages are one of the hallmarks of the widening social inequality in America. One recent study found that the pay of corporate chief executives has rocketed from 20 times average pay in 1965 to 296 times average pay in 2013. Meanwhile, the US Labor Department estimated that some two million workers nationwide were being paid less than the minimum wage—now an abysmal $7.25 an hour—because of cheating by employers.

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