

US unions channel workers' wage demands into "Fight for 15" publicity stunts

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For the fourth year in a row, thousands of low-wage workers around the country protested during the post-Thanksgiving shopping period, called out by the "Fight for 15" campaign, an initiative heavily backed by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). According to campaign organizers actions took place Tuesday in 340 cities and 20 airports. Workers in the fast food industry were a major component of the protests, joined by contract workers at airports, home health workers, nursing home and retail workers.

While the workers' grievances are entirely legitimate, the SEIU's claim to fight for them is a complete fraud. Far from actually fighting for increased living standards for workers, the campaign is aimed at getting a foot in the door for the SEIU so it can collect dues from these highly exploited layers and ensure their own position as junior partners to the bosses. The Fight for 15 campaign is also supported by the International Socialist Organization, Socialist Alternative and other pseudo-left groups, which want to boost the authority of the largely discredited unions and Democratic Party.

One of the most egregious mechanisms used by the unions are the so-called escape clauses or waivers, which allow employers that agreed to unionizing efforts to pay less than the newly established minimum wage. Provisions of this sort have made their way into minimum wage laws and ordinances, including recent ones in Chicago, Milwaukee and cities throughout California. A clause of this kind was also written into the famous Proposition 1 that covered SeaTac (Seattle-Tacoma airport) in Washington state, which was backed not only by the SEIU, but also by Socialist Alternative and its spokeswoman Kshama Sawant, a member of the Seattle city council.

The issue of wages is highly explosive. Following the official end of recession in 2009, what tepid job growth took place was disproportionately low-wage. According

to the National Employment Law Project, 44 percent of employment growth from 2010 to 2014 was low-wage, even though low-wage jobs accounted for only 22 percent of jobs lost during the recession. It is also becoming increasingly difficult for low-wage workers to escape from low-wage work, with almost one in three minimum wage workers still earning minimum wage a year later, according to an analysis on the FiveThirtyEight web site.

Workers in these industries are highly exploited, and often endure atrocious working conditions. Airport service workers, a major focus of the recent protests, earn less than \$12 per hour on average, and almost 25 percent have received some kind of government assistance, according to research commissioned by the SEIU. In addition, more than 40 percent support children on these wages, and a similar number "admit to going hungry or skipping a meal either frequently or sometimes."

Anestine, a health care worker at the South Boston Community Health Center and a member and delegate of SEIU 1199, attended the rally at the Massachusetts State House Tuesday afternoon following a protest of workers earlier at Logan airport. "It's so important we all have a living wage because it's something we all deserve. As health care workers we shouldn't be doing two or three jobs just to put a meal on our table for our families. So I'll continue to be a part of this movement until every single institution in this state pays the \$15 an hour we deserve."

"I'm part of the workforce and like everyone else here I struggle to get by," said Eduardo, who attended the rally along with other young restaurant workers. "It's just bad, how the distribution of wealth is. I'm a restaurant worker, and I work for tips and it's hard. It's unfair that we're just struggling to get by, month to month."

While millions of low-paid workers share these sentiments, the SEIU and other union executives behind the protests are solely concerned with their own

institutional and financial interests. The extent to which workers are being used as pawns can be seen in the farcical “strike” undertaken at Chicago’s O’Hare International Airport Tuesday. Around 500 out of about 2,000 airport service workers, including janitors, baggage handlers, cabin cleaners and wheelchair attendants walked out, the only group of workers in the Fight for 15 protests on an official strike.

Having originally threatened to disrupt airport operations during the busy Thanksgiving holiday week in order to force the airport contractors to recognize the union, the SEIU pulled back and declared it would call a one-day strike to coincide with the Fight for 15 campaign. SEIU Local 1 President Tom Balanoff said, “They don’t expect to shut the airport down. That’s not what they’re trying to do.” He further clarified that what “they’re trying to do is get the powers that be to hear their voice.”

In any event, the Chicago Department of Aviation reported no flight or service disruptions. In a great irony, were the SEIU to be recognized, they could go ahead and negotiate a contract for workers agreeing to wages lower than the minimum in Chicago.

In many cities, such as Detroit, the unions organized impotent civil disobedience protests that resulted in scores of arrests across the country. The rallies included various Democratic politicians, preachers, union bureaucrats and liberal and “left” proponents of identity politics.

In Minneapolis, a visible component of the protests was a group of officials from the Minnesota Nurses Association (MNA), which betrayed the six-week strike by nearly 5,000 nurses at Allina Health who repeatedly rejected union-backed demands to destroy their health care benefits.

Underscoring the fraudulent nature of the SEIU’s claim that it is fighting on behalf of low-wage workers, the union has rebuffed attempts by Fight for 15 campaigners and organizers to be recognized as full-time employees and to organize in a union. These workers have argued that because of their long hours, they do not make \$15 an hour themselves.

The protests and rallies also served to bolster the credibility of the Democrats and falsely present them as opponents of the incoming Trump administration. The SEIU came out early in support of Hillary Clinton, despite her backing for a \$12 minimum wage. Altogether the AFL-CIO and Change to Win unions spent an estimated \$150 million on their failed efforts to elect Clinton and other Democrats.

During the eight years of the Obama administration, the

unions collaborated with Democratic Party to reduce real wages and facilitate the greatest-ever transfer of wealth from the bottom to the top of society. After bailing out Wall Street, the Obama administration, with the help of the United Auto Workers, restructured the auto industry, which included wage cuts of 50 percent for new workers, to as little as \$14 an hour.

As some 10 million workers came up for new labor agreements in 2015-2016, the unions blocked workers’ demands for a strike movement to recoup their lost wages and imposed concessionary contracts in auto, steel, telecom, retail and other industries, along with teachers, postal workers and other public sector workers. In the end wage increases were limited to little more than the rate of inflation and were more than eaten up by increased health care costs imposed by the unions in line with Obama’s Affordable Care Act.

The systematic betrayal of workers, combined with the unions’ support for Clinton, the favored candidate of Wall Street, paved the way for Donald Trump’s election and the coming to power of the most right-wing government in US history. The unions have responded by legitimizing Trump’s bogus claims that he is defending American workers and have pledged to collaborate with his administration.

While seeking to promote illusions in the Democrats—who have done everything to quell opposition to Trump and ease his transition into the White House—the unions are peddling the lie that Trump can be pressured into defending workers’ interests through impotent protests and appeals. This took the absurd form during the Fight for 15 protests, which included the demand that Trump—a fascistic political figure who has threatened to deport 2 to 3 million immigrants as one of his first acts as president—should implement “immigration reform” during his first 100 days in office!



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