

Workers at Wisconsin Wendy's restaurant walk out, demand living wage

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8 June 2018

On May 31, eight workers shut down and locked out a Wendy's restaurant in the village of Weston just outside Wausau, Wisconsin. Collectively the workers decided they could no longer tolerate unsafe working conditions, low wages and excessive hours.

The workers left a letter behind for management explaining why they walked off the job. "Due to this corporation's refusal to pay a living wage and deal with problems before it's too late, the employees you would have dealt with today have all walked off the job. We wish you all the best." The note was signed, "The Wendy's crew."

The Wendy's Company, which franchises the international fast food restaurant chain, pulled in \$1.4 billion in revenue 2017. Compensation for Wendy's President and CEO Todd A. Penegor topped \$5 million in 2016. It would take a Weston "crew-member" at Wendy's, paid \$8 an hour, approximately 308 years to earn the same amount. More than 77 percent of Wendy's restaurants are not directly owned by the company but as is common in the hyper exploitative fast food industry are franchise owned.

The Wendy's restaurant in Weston, Wisconsin is owned by Starboard Group Management, located in Coral Springs, Florida. The Starboard Group operates 180 restaurants across the United States with 5 restaurants in Brazil, and proudly boasts of \$260 million dollars in annual sales on their website. Neither the Starboard Group management, nor its CEO Andrew Levy, has formally replied to workers' demands or to media requests to comment on the workers defiant action.

The fast food industry in the United States currently numbers 3.65 million workers, some of the most exploited in the country. Many of these workers are forced to work part time, irregular and long hours, and

have few if any benefits.

Isis Hunter, 19, one of the eight Weston Wendy's workers who walked out, explained to the press the struggle she had going to school and working excessive hours. While attending Wausau High School, Hunter often worked at Wendy's till midnight and struggled to secure transportation back home at the end of her shift. "And toward the end of the semester," she told *USA Today*, "it got to the point where I chose sleep instead of going to school."

Unable to fill employee vacancies, Assistant Manager Kimberly Manteuffel was forced to schedule employees and herself to work 12 hours a day and up to 14 days in a row. Joining her daughter Isis in the walkout, Manteuffel explained the company's indifference to modest worker demands, such as hiring enough employees. Manteuffel stated that over 30 employees had quit in the last six months, citing unlivable wages and unsafe working conditions as their primary motivation for leaving.

Eighteen-year-old Nathan Brown, a former employee, showed reporters oil burn marks on his arms from a faulty chicken fryer. Other workers, forced to stand for twelve to fourteen hours a day, had to seek medical treatment for back and chest pains.

Manteuffel's struggle to run the restaurant finally reached a breaking point this past week. Her repeated appeals to management, asking them for employee raises even at the expense of her own, were left unanswered. After employees walked out, Manteuffel told *USA Today* that she received text messages from the district manager imploring her to return to the "Wendy's family," and offering the employees an insulting one dollar raise. Manteuffel did not trust management offers, noting in the past that promised raises took months to materialize, if ever.

While workers are forced to sacrifice their health and labor for a company indifferent to their lives, the industry is “booming.” Fast food sales are estimated to exceed \$200 billion dollars in the United States and \$570 billion worldwide in 2018. While workers generate massive revenue for these restaurants their pay is staggeringly low.

According to a *Statista* report, average compensation for a full-time fast food worker is just \$13,501. The revenue generated per fast food employee meanwhile is \$55,650, more than four times their compensation. This meager compensation requires workers to seek government assistance to meet basic needs. It is estimated that over 50 percent of fast food employees, nearly 2 million people, make use of public assistance programs.

The courageous stand by the Wendy’s workers in Wisconsin highlights the growing opposition of broad sections of workers who have seen their living standards decline for decades. As among teachers and autoworkers, these workers are determined to stand up and fight for better working conditions, fair compensation and benefits. Support for the Wendy’s workers actions was visible across social media, with comments left by readers expressing support and agreement with their demands.

Meanwhile, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) has sought to channel the rebellion in Weston behind the fraudulent “Fight for Fifteen” campaign and back into the dead end of the Democratic Party.

While fast food workers increasingly want to fight back against their conditions of hyper-exploitation, the SEIU has no intention of fighting for a greater expansion of living standards for these workers. Like every other trade union today, the SEIU seeks to increase its dues base while operating as a junior partner to management in the exploitation of these workers.

Low wage jobs have proliferated across the United States in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis and subsequent bank bailout that brought about a gigantic transfer of wealth from the working class to the financial aristocracy. The Obama administration and the Democratic Party played a leading role in this process working closely with the trade unions, which have artificially suppressed strikes.

Despite the efforts by the unions and the Democratic Party to subvert and contain the class struggle, workers are increasingly coming into conflict with these organizations. Workers in the fast food industry, just as much as teachers, autoworkers, transit workers and others, confront the same assault on their living standards. What is required is the unification of all these struggles, in opposition to the trade unions and the parties of big business, in the fight for the interests of the entire working class.



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