

“McStrike”: UK unions police anger of young workers

Alice Summers and Robert Stevens
20 October 2018

Workers at McDonald’s, TGI Fridays, JD Wetherspoons, UberEats and Deliveroo recently struck in several cities, culminating in a rally in central London. Workers at the five food-delivery, restaurant and pub chains took part in coordinated strikes October 4.

Staff at several McDonald’s branches previously struck in September 2017, in the first such action in the UK. Some also took part in what was dubbed the McStrike in May this year.

In the 2017 action, a small group of McDonald’s workers from the Crayford and Cambridge branches struck to demand a wage of at least £10 an hour, secure working hours and the right to form trade unions. This May, a larger group of workers from branches in Manchester, Watford, Crayford and Cambridge walked out, opposing zero-hours contracts and the appalling working conditions in many restaurants.

In January, McDonald’s announced the biggest raise workers at the company had seen in a decade, but pay remains abysmal. For workers under the age of 18, hourly compensation can start from as low as £5.75. Workers aged 25 or over receive a starting salary of £8 an hour—only 17 pence above the national minimum wage. The new pay rate only applied to staff members at company-owned McDonald’s branches—about a quarter of all restaurants. The roughly 90,000 remaining workers in UK franchises were not affected.

McDonald’s CEO Steve Easterbrook was paid £16.57 million last year—a raise of £4.7 million, or 42 percent over his 2016 pay.

This month’s strikes, dubbed the “Fast Food Shutdown,” saw workers from McDonald’s, TGI Fridays and JD Wetherspoons pubs again call for a pay rate of £10 an hour and an end to insecure working conditions. UberEats couriers are demanding £5 per

delivery and a further £1 per mile travelled as a minimum. Around 50 couriers and supporters temporarily occupied the lobby of Uber’s London headquarters.

The McStrike movement has specifically aligned itself with the “Fight for \$15” campaign in the US. Last September’s strike was timed to coincide with the US Labor Day fast food workers strike. That obtaining such a low wage is now considered to be a major objective is testament to the drastic degradation of the conditions and pay of the working class over the last decades.

This assault on the social position of workers has seen higher-paid, full-time positions, with a modicum of job security and working benefits, replaced with low-wage and precarious employment. Around 20 percent of Britain’s 33 million workers earn an annual salary of £15,000 or less.

Young workers are among the worst paid and most exploited. People under 30 years of age earn on average nearly £3 less an hour than those above 30, and precarious employment among the young has risen by 80 percent in hotels and restaurants since 1998.

A wage of £10 an hour will do little to alleviate this situation.

The strike action this month mobilised only a few dozen workers from each company. The Bakers, Food and Allied Workers Union (BFAWU), which represents striking staff at McDonald’s and Wetherspoons, balloted a handful of workers at less than a dozen restaurants across the country. The same was true for the striking employees at TGI Fridays, represented by Unite.

Workers from only two Wetherspoons pubs in Brighton, four McDonald’s branches and three TGI Fridays restaurants participated in the strike, while

sporadic work stoppages took place among delivery drivers across the country.

According to McDonald's, just 21 workers out of a workforce of 120,000 took part.

The small-scale participation does not reflect a lack of anger or the willingness to fight on the part of exploited young workers, but a total lack of confidence in the unions waging any serious struggle. According to figures from the Trades Union Congress, just 9.3 percent of young workers aged between 21 and 30 and earning low to average wages are union members. Of those under 25, just 8 percent are in a union. In the private sector, the level drops to just 6 percent.

It is under these conditions that some workers in the gig economy have been recruited to smaller unions, such as the Independent Workers of Great Britain (a split-off from public sector union Unison and the Unite union) and the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW).

It is in the context of widespread disaffection with the trade unions that efforts have been made by sections of the union bureaucracy, the Labour Party leadership around Jeremy Corbyn and pseudo-left organisations to present the unions as fighting organisations. The main purpose of calling sporadic and small strikes for these forces is to corral a layer of young militant workers into the unions and to keep social discontent within safe channels.

In his speech to the rally in London on October 4, Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell boldly declared, "Let me be absolutely clear that the Labour party is 100 percent behind this strike. ... The message to every exploitative employer in this country is that we're coming for you. We're not tolerating low pay, insecurity and lack of respect. We will mobilise as one movement: the Labour and trade union movement in solidarity."

Resuscitating the flagging authority of the unions is just as important as Corbyn's claims to be fashioning Labour as an opponent of austerity—and just as bogus. The Labour supporting *New Statesman* commented, "The UK's food industry, with the precarious employment it brings, could revive the dwindling British trade union movement among young workers."

The McStrike was hailed as a "rewiring of capitalism" by *Guardian* columnist Owen Jones. As someone who began his own lucrative career as a lobbyist for the trade unions, he held up the example of

a McDonald's worker at a branch in Crawley, London, who is "now a union official with the Bakers, Food and Allied Workers Union ..."

As the result of mounting anger among Amazon workers at backbreaking conditions, the company recently agreed to increase pay rates in the US and UK. But this will be more than offset by depriving workers of previous bonuses and shares they were previously entitled to.

In a similar attempt to pacify its workforce, last month Wetherspoons announced that it was bringing forward an annual pay award. Pay will remain low, with the company trumpeting the fact that its lower pay rate for 18- to 20-year-olds will be abolished, meaning that all workers above 21 will receive just £8.25 an hour. Workers under 18 will get a rise of just 50 pence to £5.95 an hour.

Where companies with a long history of opposing unions agree to recognise them, such as at Ryanair, it is on the basis that the unions prove themselves to be reliable corporate partners who will act as an industrial police force.

Securing the right to good-paying jobs is only possible by building a powerful movement of the working class and carrying out a frontal assault on the entrenched wealth and political power of the corporate and financial oligarchy.

What is required is the formation of rank-and-file factory and workplace committees, independent of the corporate-controlled unions and the Labour Party. This must be combined with a political struggle by workers to overthrow the economic and political dictatorship of the capitalist exploiters, expropriate their obscene wealth, and transform giant corporations like McDonalds, Uber and Amazon into publicly owned bodies democratically controlled by the working class.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact