

Missouri Aviary Cafe workers strike, charge they are “overworked like slaves”

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About a dozen non-union restaurant workers at the French-style Aviary Cafe in Springfield, Missouri, walked off the job July 25 and formed a picket line, saying they were “overworked like slaves.” Workers said the immediate cause of the walkout was an incident the previous day, where, during a hectic brunch, management left to relax at the local casino.

Perry Ashlock, who works in the kitchen, wrote on Facebook, “The whole intention with our walkout was to let them understand what it was like to be left understaffed during a crisis situation.”

Another striker, Brad Russell, told the *Springfield News-Leader* that throughout the pandemic, workers had been promised raises, “but it never happened.”

Ashlock added, “They have told us time and time again recently that we have smashed various sales records for the restaurant.”

Ericka Loreda, an Aviary sous cook, told the *News-Leader* she worked 65 hours a week and didn’t get benefits or vacation. “I often had 14-hour workdays. From 7:30 a.m. to the end of the day. But, once again, there were no breaks. The environment is extremely harmful in general. I felt as if I were a slave. We were treated like slaves because we were overworked.”

Loreda said she felt “unsafe” working in the Aviary’s “small kitchen so close together with so many people” as the COVID-19 Delta variant surged in southwest Missouri.

Nick Holland, a server and leader of the walkout, stated: “We just wanted higher wages—\$20 an hour specifically for our back of house kitchen staff, who were making anywhere from around \$10 to \$15 an hour. We wanted healthcare and for them to stop overworking us.”

But management ignored the appeal and cracked down, firing seven workers and providing gift cards to

mollify workers who remained on the job.

The Aviary strike is but a microcosm of the conflict between the restaurant industry and a growing militancy among workers demanding better working conditions, wages and benefits, and compensation for bearing the burden of the year-long pandemic.

As restaurants and the fast food industry have tried to restore operations, they are encountering a shortage of workers to staff facilities and a new militancy on the part of workers, who are not inclined to return to the cheap-labor, highly exploitative jungle of the food service industry.

The National Federation of Independent Business reports that 42 percent of their small business owners are reporting they are unable to fill job openings. This has made it impossible to resume longer business hours in order to recapture revenues they lost during the pandemic.

One reaction has been to try to compel existing workers to take up the slack. Kitchen workers are often assigned carry food out to customers tables and then to bus dishes back to the kitchen when meals are finished.

In some parts of the country, drought and excessively high temperatures have also exacerbated the situation, with some employees simply abandoning their jobs. Workers and a manager at a Burger King in Lincoln, Nebraska, left their posts and changed the sign outside the building to read: “We all quit. Sorry for the inconvenience.” Workers at the grill complained of working 50 to 60 hour shifts in temperatures of 90 degrees or more.

The crunch further intensified when retailers such as Amazon increased entry-level wages. McDonald’s responded by announcing a 10 percent immediate wage increase in June and that general wages of its workers will reach \$15 an hour by 2024. But this affects only

the 650 company-owned fast food restaurants. It has another 13,000 restaurants run by franchisees, and they are spread across various locations where profits can vary widely and pressure from the corporate office to raise wages may cut into profitability.

The promotion to a management position in a fast food restaurant used to be considered a perk, providing slightly higher wages and some benefits. But managers are now being driven to cover for labor shortages. A McDonald's franchise operator who manages 45 restaurants in Pennsylvania, Ohio and West Virginia said one of his managers reported to him that after exhausting long shifts, she simply slept for three hours in her car rather than commuting home, waking up to immediately resume her next shift.

The manager, in a candid admission to CNBC, said of the wage increases, "If there wasn't a huge shortage of labor, we might not have taken the action."

For the smaller chains and independent restaurants, the current economic environment leaves little room for maneuvering under conditions where the bulk of government pandemic assistance has gone to the big chains. Strikes by workers have been quickly resolved by immediate wage increases by those operators who can for the moment afford it, firing the most militant workers or simply shuttering operations.

On the part of the political establishment and corporate media, the predominate reaction to the labor shortage has been to rail against pandemic unemployment stipends and other benefits. Some 26 states, including Missouri, have terminated the \$300 supplemental federal unemployment assistance well before the September expiration in an effort to drive workers back into cheap-labor jobs.

The difficulties faced by employers in recruiting low-wage workers is tied to many other issues, including the lack of affordable child care and lack of health care benefits. The single-minded focus of the Biden administration on forcing the reopening of the schools to in-person learning is in large part motivated by the demands of employers to free up parents from child care in order that they can return to workplaces.

The shortage of workers willing to work for poverty level wages is not just an issue confined to the restaurant industry. The entire hospitality industry, including hotel and entertainment venues, face an intensification of class struggle.

Over 10 years ago, the trade union bureaucracy, in alliance with various pseudo-left organizations, launched the Fight for 15 campaign aimed at lobbying for an increase in the federal minimum wage. This was accompanied by the staging of a few token protest stunts aimed at diverting anger over starvation levels of pay, never at mobilizing the broad mass of low-wage workers in a militant struggle in alliance with the broader working class. The demand for a \$15 an hour wage was inadequate when it was advanced 10 years ago and is even less adequate now under conditions of escalating inflation.

While the move by restaurant workers and other low-paid sectors to fight against super-exploitation is welcome, it requires a conscious program and leadership. Workers in the restaurant industry should follow the example of teachers, autoworkers, Amazon workers and others by organizing their own independent rank-and-file committees to wage a struggle against the fast food chains and the profit system as a whole in the fight for decent pay and conditions.



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