

“Why would you want to come to work in a 100 degrees kitchen for \$10 an hour?”

KFC workers walk out at Alabama restaurant after working six weeks without air conditioning

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On July 2, workers at a KFC restaurant in the rural town of Hartselle in northern Alabama carried out a walkout after working for more than six weeks without air conditioning. The walkout was led by the store’s general manager Ta Edwards, who was fired immediately by the restaurant’s operator, Tasty Chick’n LLC. The remaining employees were forced to return to work on July 5 after Tasty Chick’n falsely claimed they had repaired the restaurant’s AC unit.

Tasty Chick’n LLC manages KFC franchises on behalf of Tasty Brands, which is itself owned by private equity firm Triton Pacific Capital Partners. Tasty Brands is one of many enterprises that have profited during the pandemic; between the fourth quarters of 2020 and 2021, its adjusted income rose from \$2.9 million to \$3.4 million.

The walkout took place during a summer which has seen record-breaking heat waves in many parts of the country. The week before the walkout, 24-year-old UPS driver Esteban Chavez, Jr. died of suspected heat stroke in Pasadena, California. Air temperatures had risen above the mid 90s, and UPS trucks are not air-conditioned. Workers at the Hartselle KFC had begun exhibiting worrying early symptoms of heat stroke before the walkout, indicating that it may have literally saved lives.

The unit broke down in the middle of May as

temperatures in Alabama skyrocketed. Edwards informed his direct supervisor, Director of Operations Earnest Smith, of the malfunction on May 16. An HVAC maintenance repairman inspected the unit and reported to Edwards that each of the system’s three compressors had stopped working. Smith assured Edwards that the compressors would be repaired within a week.

“That’s all I heard until a couple of weeks ago,” Edwards told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “Next week, next week, next week.”

With a nationwide heat wave bearing down, the temperatures in the kitchen rose to 100 degrees Fahrenheit. “There was some nights I had to send people home because they were so tired and so exhausted. People were on the verge of passing out and turning red. One kid stopped sweating, and I knew that was a sign of dehydration. I sent him home and told him to tell his parents what’s going on,” says Edwards.

As the weeks went by, conditions became more and more unbearable. Edwards refused to discipline the no-call, no-shows. “Why,” he asks, “would you want to come to work in a 100 degrees kitchen for \$10 an hour?”

“Both coolers were malfunctioning and the freezer too,” Edwards said. Coleslaw spoiled prematurely in the overburdened coolers; management directed Edwards to put it on ice until it looked presentable again and sell it anyway. Edwards refused.

“[Tasty Chick’n] doesn’t care anything about the

food they're selling or the safety of their employees. It's all money, money, money," Edwards says. "Eventually, I got tired of hearing 'next week.'"

In the last week of June, he detailed the ongoing issues in an email to Tasty Chick'n's Director of Restaurant Excellence, Tommy Cash, and President Steven Abigail.

Tommy Cash responded almost immediately, reprimanding Edwards for not going through the chain of command. Edwards replied that he had already done so to no avail. "That started a firestorm," he says.

"They were more concerned about the email going to Steven Abigail instead of getting the air turned on for the employees."

Edwards was finally allowed to purchase fans for the kitchen after several volleys of emails. He pointed out the futility of the gesture. "I don't know if you've ever been somewhere hot and tried to cool it down with fans, but all it does is move hot air around."

He appealed to Cash, an ordained minister, on moral grounds, telling him, "It seems that you out of all people would understand the predicament I'm in."

"Right now, I'm not working for God," Cash told him. "I'm working for Tasty Chick'n."

"You're risking people's lives, and I'm not about that," Edwards retorted. Once again, he was told the unit would be repaired "soon."

By Friday July 1, no repairs seemed imminent. Edwards sent District Manager Michael Bumpus a concise email: "My people are fed up."

On July 2, Bumpus told him he could not say when the unit would be repaired.

"The only thing I know to get their attention is to just leave," Edwards says. He promptly expressed this to his employees, and they agreed to a walkout. "They're scared. Nobody wants to lose their job, but they're fed up."

"We cleaned the restaurant up for the night, cleaned it up real good. We emailed Michael Bumpus and told him we were not coming in until the air is fixed."

Last Monday, Tasty Chick'n fired Edwards. The company immediately made a disingenuous statement to the press in which they blamed the delayed repairs on supply chain issues and referred to the fans Edwards was allowed to buy as "temporary A C units." They concluded with an insulting verbal sleight of hand, "We can confirm no termination occurred due to this

employee complaint."

Edwards, they implied, had only been fired for closing down the restaurant.

Meanwhile, Edwards' employees were told that the unit had been repaired and were instructed to report for duty on Tuesday, July 5, or face immediate termination.

On Tuesday, workers clocked in to find that only one compressor had been repaired; new covers were slapped over the remaining two in order to disguise their disrepair. Employees were made to sign prewritten statements denouncing Edwards and the walkout. A teenage employee was offered money to manufacture false statements against Edwards.

When Edwards visited his former staff on Wednesday, it was 95 degrees Fahrenheit in the restaurant. A hole in the kitchen floor, present since Edwards first became manager, remains covered over with no structural repairs. Leaks in the ceiling over the freezer force employees to chip away dirty ice with picks and shovels every time it rains.

"Those guys became my family and my friends," says Edwards, who has managed the restaurant since 2019. "I'm still worried about them. They're still working in 95, 100 degrees. They need air. They're acting like they fixed all 3 compressors when they'd only replaced one. One of the kids is hypoglycemic, when he came back, Earnest wouldn't let him take a break to eat. He was just pushing him. I don't know what would have happened if he had passed out. He wasn't worried about that kid's safety at all."

He says the workers are unhappy and are considering walking out again. "No one has apologized, no one has thanked them. And they refused to pay them for the days we walked out."



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