



Fast food workers fight for better pay, benefits

Imagine trying to make ends meet if your pay was \$7.25 an hour—the national minimum wage. Assuming a 40-hour workweek, your total pay would come to \$290 a week. How could anyone survive on such low pay?

Activist groups and labor unions have taken up the cause and are calling for a \$15 minimum wage to allow workers to better provide for their families and to have a greater sense of financial security.

Fast food workers are among those who are fighting for a higher wage, and not just in the United States. On May 15, fast food workers and supporters rallied in 130 U.S. cities for a \$15 minimum wage. Additionally, fast food workers rallied for higher pay in 30 countries ranging from South Korea to Ireland and Morocco to Panama.

The first mass strike of fast food workers occurred in November 2012 and was led by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). The need for greater union representation was a pressing concern for the striking workers. “We’re here to get \$15 and a union, we’re here to strike, we’re here to make some noise and we’re here to disrupt because that’s the only way to get their attention,” New York Taco Bell employee Chad Tall said on CNN.

While fast food workers at a variety of employers have been protesting, much attention has been paid to McDonald’s. In March, three class-action lawsuits were filed accusing the multibillion corporation of wage theft. The suits detail the various ways in which McDonald’s allegedly fails to pay its employees even the base minimum wage. Some are asked to work off-the-clock to improperly decrease the recorded number of hours worked. Others are asked to pay for their own uniforms, thereby decreasing their disposable income. These alleged

abuses by McDonald’s underscore the need for greater wage fairness, in addition to higher wages.

Meet the real fast food workers

A goal of these protests is to show how many fast food workers are adults with families to support. Part of the problem with gaining support for fast food workers is the persistence of inaccurate images of the typical worker. People often think of teenagers with no family to support, or of individuals with a high school diploma who are unable to qualify for any other type of work.

A 2013 study by the Center for Economic and Policy Research (CEPR) indicates that these stereotypes are misleading. In terms of education, the CEPR reported that 31 percent of fast food workers have at least some college experience and are likely to have taken out college loans, which further strains the low wages offered by these positions.

Also among the CEPR’s findings were that 70 percent of fast food workers are 20 and older, with 36.4 percent between the ages of 25 and 54. Meanwhile, another study, conducted by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, found that half of all fast food workers are over the age of 29; 26.6 percent have children.

Big profits and big inequality

The low wages of McDonald’s and other fast food giants cast a light on the inequality in an industry worth billions of dollars. The fast food industry rakes in enormous profits. The 10 largest companies in the industry made a total profit of \$7.4 billion in 2012, according to the National Employment Law Project (NELP). In 2010, the entire industry generated total revenue of \$184 billion in more than 300,000 restaurants employing 3.9



Correction:

In the May issue of *The Postal Record*, we ran a photo from the *St. Louis Post Dispatch* that identified someone else as Congressional Gold Medal winner James Wilkes. At left is the real Wilkes. We apologize for the error.

million people, according to Statista, a statistics company.

Even with this immense revenue and profit, the fast food industry is ranked high among the most unequal economic sectors. A study published by Demos, a non-partisan public policy organization, showed that in 2012, the compensation of a fast food corporation chief executive officer (CEO) was 1,200 times the earnings of the average fast food worker. The average wage of a CEO was \$23.8 million in 2013, four times the value in 2000. By contrast, 79 percent fast food workers over the age of 20 earn less than \$10.10 an hour, and these wages increased just 0.3 percent over the same 2000 to 2012 period, according to CEPR.

Opportunities and challenges

This level of inequality provides an opportunity for labor organizers and activists to rally both fast food workers and the public for higher wages and better conditions. The protests of November 2012 and May 2014 had the combined effect of raising these two issues in the public consciousness.

There is even some evidence that this activism is having an effect within the fast food giants themselves. McDonald's, for one, seems to be getting wise to the idea that paying workers low wages may lead to its own undoing. The company's 2013 annual report noted several potential risks to the corporation, including "the impact of campaigns by labor organizations and activists," "the increasing focus on workplace practices and conditions," and "our exposure to reputational and other harm as a result of perceptions about our workplace practices or conditions or those of franchises."

When paying people low wages becomes a public relations concern,

it can open up greater possibilities for union organizing. A company might be more receptive to paying workers higher wages and more open to union representation if it senses that not having these will decrease patronage or the company's efficiency.

The growing size of the fast food labor force could pose both a challenge and an opportunity for the broader labor movement. The fast food industry is one of the highest growth sectors in the nation, according to Demos. The increasing number of people working in this sector presents a chance to expand labor's membership numbers while raising a huge portion of the U.S. labor force out of poverty. Also, since these jobs cannot be outsourced, unions have more bargaining power when it comes to negotiating wages and benefits.

However, workers in the fast food industry are often dispersed into hundreds of franchises that make organizing difficult. This franchise model makes it especially difficult for organizers, as each franchise is responsible for setting wages for its employees. This has allowed McDonald's to claim no responsibility for the plight of franchise employees.

In spite of these challenges, labor activists all over the country continue to push for higher wages and better conditions, given what's at stake.

"It would be very easy to simply look away and say, 'This is not our fight,'" NALC President Fredric Rolando said, "but the struggles for workers' rights are happening in every industry, from manufacturing to fast food retail to the public sector. We all must stand up and be part of this fight." **PR**



Activists call for \$15/hour pay for fast food workers.

Photo by Steve Rhodes