

Research into the Campaigns of Low Wage Workers in the United States

By Joyce Sinakhone

Joyce Sinakhone is conducting her master's thesis research on the fast-food workers movement, and is assisting the Center in launching its new Master's in Labor and Global Workers' Rights program.

In recent months, low-wage workers across the nation have been standing up against exploitative practices and seeking improvements that affect all workers in the U.S., including those who often are not often afforded basic employee protections. Jamaican workers at a resort in Florida shed light on guestworkers being issued zero dollar paychecks, and housed in squalid, employer-controlled housing. Meanwhile, these workers endured threats of deportation (National Guestworker Alliance, 2013, September 3). Meanwhile, immigrant women working in domestic labor celebrated the passage of the California Domestic Worker Bill of Rights on September 26, 2013, which granted overtime pay, meal and rest breaks and improved sleeping arrangements for live-in workers (National Domestic Workers Alliance, n.d.). Gains made by such groups prevent wage depression, the replacement of stable jobs with precarious positions, and eroding working conditions for all workers (Level Playing Field, 2012).

Perhaps this is why the unprecedented organization of vulnerable workers in other occupations is so important. On August 29, 2013, fast food workers staged a coordinated strike that involved 58 cities across the United States, and despite being employed in a notoriously anti-union industry (Eidelson, 2013, August 29). In 2012, most of the 3.6 million workers who earned the federal minimum wage of \$7.25 or below worked in service occupations, such as food preparation (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013, February 26). It's no surprise that these low-wage workers are fighting for a living wage and the chance to form a union without retaliation since their numbers are on the rise. Job growth during the recession has been led by such low-wage service occupations (National Employment Law Project, 2012). And contrary to popular belief, low wage earners who would be impacted by a minimum wage increase are likely to be working full time, yet living in families making less than \$60,000 (55 percent and 70 percent respectively) (Economic Policy Institute, 2013, March 13), older (average age of 35 years old), and better educated (44 percent have at least some college education) (Economic Policy Institute, 2013, August 28).

Low-wage workers have been demanding better wages and the fair chance to organize with the help of union-backed community groups, including food service and gift shop employees under federal contracts, concessions and leases (Good Jobs Nation, n.d.). Supported by Good Jobs Nation, a Change to Win affiliate (Eidelson, 2013, May 21), workers employed by private companies under federal contracts delivered a petition urging President Obama to sign an executive order that would raise wages for 560,000 low-wage employees (Traub, 2013). Additionally, rallies in Seattle have escalated into multi-restaurant actions to protest the supposed wrongful termination of a Subway employee for leading organizing efforts among his colleagues (Eidelson, 2013, September 29). Similar outbursts of worker unrest increased in recent months, as campaigns responded to terrible working conditions and retaliatory actions at the hands of management—yet sometimes with positive results. Warehouse Workers United

members, in collaboration Change to Win, brought a federal lawsuit against a Walmart-controlled warehouse in 2011 alleging wage theft—such as forced unpaid overtime and off the clock work. In February 2012, workers gained permanent jobs after a U.S. District Court in California prohibited the warehouse’s temporary contract agencies from firing groups of employees in reaction to the federal lawsuit (Warehouse Workers United, 2012, February 2). Two years after filing the lawsuit, in August 2013, the workers won a 60 percent raise and benefits (Warehouse Workers United, 2012, August 19). When ten workers were suspended this summer for taking a 5-minute water break, three of them won their jobs back with the support of Rep. Mark Takano (Warehouse Workers United, August 27).

OUR Walmart, an organization of Walmart associates tied to the United Food and Commercial Workers and a member of the UNI Global Union Alliance, has also escalated efforts in response to supposed management retaliation. The labor organization claims that about 70 employees were either disciplined or fired for involvement with strikes carried out in June 2013 (Eidelson, 2013, August 22). Nine workers were arrested and charged with misdemeanors for blocking a passage at an August rally where the group announced a Labor Day ultimatum: either the retailer reinstate terminated employees and raise wages to a minimum of \$25,000 per year, or OUR Walmart promises massive walkouts during this year’s Black Friday shopping season (Eidelson, 2013, August 22). The Labor Day deadline demands were left unmet by the corporation.

In another case, in September 2013, Victoria’s Secret workers at a New York City location participated in the “Just Hours” campaign led by the Retail Action Project (affiliated with United Food and Commercial Workers division, Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union, and Good Old Lower East Side) (Retail Action Project, n.d.), and won raises of between \$1 and \$2 an hour. One employee featured in a recent article saw a wage increase of over 20% to \$11.90 per hour (Fox, 2013, September 11). It is unclear whether retail and fast food workers’ around the nation will be able to achieve a living wage, but some companies have already proven that it is possible. Costco famously offers much better wages and benefits compared to Sam’s Club, but fast food companies also profited while paying workers a fair wage (Covert, 2013, August 22). Detroit-based burger eatery Moo Cluck Moo boasts a starting wage of \$15 per hour (Huffington Post, 2013, September 10) and In-N-Out offers benefits for part and full time employees along with higher starting wages (Lutz, 2013, February 27). One employee earned a starting wage of \$10 an hour, but is aspiring to move into a leadership position where assistant managers have the opportunity to earn between \$40,000 and \$70,000 per year (Lutz, 2013, February 27).

References

Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2013, February 26). Characteristics of minimum wage workers.

Retrieved from <http://www.bls.gov/cps/minwage2012.htm>

Covert, B. (2013, August, 22). Former McDonald’s CEO claims raising the minimum wage

would kill jobs. Retrieved from

<http://thinkprogress.org/economy/2013/08/22/2509161/mcdonalds-minimum-wage-kill-jobs/>

Eidelson, J. (2013, May 21). Hundreds of non-union workers with taxpayer-supported jobs plan to strike today. Retrieved from <http://www.thenation.com/blog/174448/hundreds-non-union-workers-taxpayer-supported-jobs-plan-strike-today#>

Eidelson, J. (2013, August 22). Fired Walmart workers arrested at rally announcing Labor Day deadline. Retrieved from <http://www.thenation.com/blog/175875/fired-walmart-workers-arrested-rally-announcing-labor-day-deadline#>

Eidelson, J. (2013, August 29). Largest fast food strike ever today: 58 cities will be affected. Retrieved from http://www.salon.com/2013/08/29/largest_fast_food_strike_ever_today_50_cities_will_be_affected/

Eidelson, J. (2013, August 29). Largest fast food strike ever today: 58 cities will be affected. Retrieved from http://www.salon.com/2013/08/29/largest_fast_food_strike_ever_today_50_cities_will_be_affected/

Eidelson, J. (2013, September 27). Fired for giving a kid a 66 cent cookie! Retrieved from http://www.salon.com/2013/09/27/fired_for_giving_a_kid_a_66_cent_cookie/

Economic Policy Institute. (2013, March 13). Raising the federal minimum wage to \$10.10 would give working families, and the overall economy, a much-needed boost. Retrieved from <http://www.epi.org/publication/bp357-federal-minimum-wage-increase/>

Economic Policy Institute. (2013, August 28). Low-wage workers are older than you think.

Retrieved from <http://www.epi.org/publication/wage-workers-older-88-percent-workers-benefit/>

Fox, E. J. (2013, September 11). Victoria's Secret NY workers win fight for better pay.

Retrieved from <http://money.cnn.com/2013/09/11/news/companies/victorias-secret-workers/index.html>

Good Jobs Nation. (n.d.). About. Retrieved from <http://goodjobsnation.org/#about>

Leveling the playing field. (2012). Retrieved from <http://www.guestworkeralliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Leveling-the-Playing-Field-final.pdf>

Lutz, A. (2013, February 27). In-N-Out employees can work their way up to \$120,000 a year with no degree or previous experience. Retrieved from

<http://www.businessinsider.com/in-and-out-employee-pay-2013-2>

Huffington Post.(2013, August 10). This burger joint is raising its starting salary to \$15 per hour.

Retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/09/10/moo-cluck-moo-wages_n_3899574.html

National Employment Law Project. (August, 2012a). The low-wage recovery and growing inequality. *Data Brief*, 1-8.

National Domestic Workers Alliance. (n.d.). California Bill of Rights. Retrieved from

<http://www.domesticworkers.org/ca-bill-of-rights>

Traub, A. (2013, September 28). Capitol workers strike to protest federally subsidized inequality.

Retrieved from <http://blog.usw.org/2013/09/28/capitol-workers-strike-to-protest-federally-subsidized-inequality/>

Retail Action Project. (n.d.). About. Retrieved from <http://retailactionproject.org/about/>

Warehouse Workers United. (2013, August 19). Warehouse workers win 60 percent raise plus benefits. Retrieved from <http://www.warehouseworkersunited.org/warehouse-workers-win-60-percent-raise-plus-benefits/>

Warehouse Workers United. (2013, August 27). Rep. Takano asks tough questions of warehouse operator. Retrieved from <http://www.warehouseworkersunited.org/rep-takano-asks-tough-questions-of-warehouse-operator/>