

Union-organized fast food worker action promotes Democratic Party

By Philip Guelpa
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On Thursday, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and affiliated groups organized over 100 protests and demonstrations in cities across the United States. The actions are part of a deliberate effort by the unions and sections of the Democratic Party to exploit the very real grievances of poorly paid service workers to channel opposition back into the political establishment.

Recent studies have shown that the majority of fast food workers are adults, many with families, who are paid so poorly, averaging less than \$9/hour, that they must rely on government support in order to survive.

The protest organizers raised the demand that the minimum wage, now \$7.25/hour nationally, be raised to \$15/hour. Workers interviewed at rally after rally spoke of the extreme difficulties they face in trying to meet the minimum expenses for themselves and their families with the pittance they are paid. These conditions have been made even worse by recent cuts in programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, or food stamps).

Akilarose Thompson, a 24-year-old McDonald's worker in Chicago, summed up her feelings. "It is so depressing. You put a smile on because you're in customer service and you have to. But on the inside it really breaks you down when you're always at work but you're always broke."

The protests generally drew 100 people or less, with the one in New York City attracting up to one thousand. From the standpoint of the unions, they were intended largely as media stunts, organized so as not to cause any significant economic damage to the corporations.

Among those organizing the protests were a number of groups such as Fast Food Forward and Low Pay is Not OK that are associated with the SEIU. The event

was closely coordinated with sections of the Democratic Party, along with pro-Democratic Party groups like the International Socialist Organization.

A day earlier, President Obama had made a speech about the problems of low-wage workers and the need to raise the minimum wage (see "Obama postures as an opponent of inequality"). The speech was part of a larger campaign which is attempting to refurbish the image of the Democratic Party following five years in which hopes for economic improvement raised by Obama's presidency among millions of people have been dashed. The roll-out of the Affordable Care Act (aka Obamacare) has also made evident the right-wing and pro-corporate character of that program.

For his part, newly-elected New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio, who was heavily promoted by the unions, issued a statement declaring that he was "proud to stand strong with the working men and women in the Fast Food Forward movement..." De Blasio, however, committed himself to nothing and did not actually attend the demonstration.

Media reports, on the whole, were also generally sympathetic toward the protests, a clear indication that they are not considered a threat. While sections of the political establishment may occasionally feign concern with the deteriorating conditions of the working class, it is the policies that they have implemented which have created those conditions.

Unions across the country have for decades been collaborating with business and government in imposing cuts in wages and benefits. This year, for example, New York City school bus workers, who had achieved a modicum of employment and wage stability after a bitter strike three decades ago, are being driven into unemployment and poverty after the city abrogated the Employment Protection Provision (EPP).

The attack on the bus workers was made possible by the Amalgamated Transit Union, which shut down a strike based on the meaningless promise by Democratic mayoral candidates to “revisit the issue” after the election. De Blasio has given no indication that he will make any changes to the policy that has already led to 2,000 workers losing their jobs, with thousands more layoffs to come.

For many decades, and even more sharply since the 2008 financial crisis, the US capitalist class has pursued a relentless policy of wealth accumulation for a small fraction of the population by driving down the living standards of the working class. The great majority of new jobs created since 2008 have been in low-wage sectors. The result has been a staggering growth in economic inequality, with the conditions of workers now worse than they were decades ago.

The present economic condition of fast food workers, “big box store” retail workers, and many others earning wages at or near the pitifully inadequate minimum wage in the US is not an accident, the result of mistaken decisions, or simply caused by a few excessively greedy corporations.

The plight of these workers, whose ranks are increasing daily, not to speak of the millions of long-term unemployed, is the consequence of a conscious policy by the ruling class in the US, led by the Obama administration and fully supported by the Democratic Party. The conditions faced by garment workers in Bangladesh, electronics workers in China, miners in South Africa are the conditions that are increasingly being forced on workers in the “developed” capitalist nations under the justification of the need to increase “efficiency” and “competitiveness.” This process has so far been most obvious in such places as Greece, Spain, and Portugal, but is being implemented across the globe.

Under these conditions, it is a bald-faced lie to tell workers that they can achieve any meaningful improvements by protest aimed at the political and corporate elite. Across the country, in city after city, from San Francisco, to Chicago, to Detroit, Democratic mayors, with union collaboration, have carried out attacks on working people. Yet union executives and pseudo-left groups continue to promote support for the Democrats.

In New York City, union leaders and groups such as

the International Socialist Organization (ISO) have gone into overdrive to promote the idea that if only enough pressure can be brought to bear, de Blasio will do “progressive” things for the working class. A recent article in the ISO’s *Socialist Worker*, entitled “It’s put-up-or-shut-up time for Bill de Blasio,” concluded by urging, “So let’s go to today’s rally and tell our new mayor that we want real solutions to inequality.”

This process of pauperization of the working class has been made possible by the open collaboration of union leaderships and various pseudo-left groups. These forces represent a privileged section of the middle class which seeks to maintain its relatively comfortable social position by controlling and diverting the rising anger of workers back into support of the existing social order.

The fight to improve the economic condition of all workers is a political struggle which can be carried forward only through a complete break with the unions, the Democratic Party, and all those who support them.

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