

# USA: Low-Wage Workers' Struggles Are About Much More than Wages

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*When fast-food workers first took the streets in New York City in November 2012 to protest for higher wages and a union, no one could have imagined how successful the campaign would be. Since then the low-wage workers movement, known as Fight for 15, has helped spur [eleven](#) states and numerous [cities](#) to raise the minimum hourly wage. It's enabled campaigns in Seattle and the Bay Area to pass citywide measures for \$15-an-hour minimum wage. Fight for 15 and a separate campaign called [Organization United for Respect at Walmart](#) has also pushed companies like McDonald's, Target, and Walmart to announce in early 2015 that they would raise the minimum wage for hundreds of thousands of employees.*



The success of the organizing is due to everything from the abysmal recovery from the 2008 economic crisis to Occupy Wall Street's role in shifting the national dialogue from austerity to economic inequality. But Fight for 15 is due primarily to the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), which initiated the campaign in 2011 and has poured tens of millions of dollars into growing waves of protest that are battering the image of the fast-food giants.

As the protests have grown, the campaign has become both broad and narrow. SEIU has linked the plight of fast-food workers to that of retail and convenience-store workers, home healthcare aides, childcare workers, and adjunct professors. At the same time Fight for 15 is focusing its fire on McDonald's. One SEIU insider says the strategy is, "Pummel them until they come to the table." Another organizer outlined the thinking back in 2013: Fight for 15 was trying to cause enough problems for McDonald's image and stock price that SEIU could say to the company, "We can make this all go away" if it agreed to a deal on wages and unionization.

## Wage Theft

Using the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), SEIU has filed charges of unfair labour practices (ULP) and wage theft against McDonald's franchises. The strategy paid off after the NLRB general counsel [ruled](#) in July 2014 that McDonald's has [joint employer](#) responsibility, opening space for SEIU to pressure the corporate parent, rather than dealing with 3,100 U.S. franchisees. SEIU is also raising the heat overseas. The European Union is investigating McDonald's for allegedly dodging more than [\\$1-billion](#) in taxes and labour federations in Brazil are suing [McDonald's largest franchisee](#) in Latin America for wage and workplace violations. A participant in a recent strategy session held with Scott Courtney, said to be SEIU's mastermind for Fight for 15, says the next step under

consideration is to create trouble for McDonald's on the property front, which is as much a titan of [real estate](#) as it is of hamburgers.

McDonald's claims the campaign has had no effect on its operations and that it could not afford to raise wages. Over the last year its international [sales](#) have been flat and its profits have fallen sharply. So its announcement on April 1 that it would [raise pay](#) for workers at corporate-owned U.S. stores was widely viewed as a concession to Fight for 15. That move [backfired](#), however, as the raise is only 89 cents an hour on average and affects just 10 per cent of its U.S. workforce. Plus, sources say McDonald's has quietly approached SEIU and is looking for a deal. For nearly two years there have been rumors that SEIU was considering some alternative to a union for the fast-food sector, such as a workers' association.

A workers' association, however, would mean fewer rights and protections for workers than a traditional union. This points to the question that's been hanging over Fight for 15 since it caught fire. What is SEIU's end game? I asked one organizer if the campaign is building working power, and the response was blunt: "The goal is not worker power. It's a contract."

Since a traditional union contract with McDonald's or any other fast-food company remains unlikely, the campaign goals need to be better aligned with reality. Fight for 15 has been remarkably successful on wages, but unless it is trying to increase workers' power on the job, any wage and benefit improvements won through public pressure, negative publicity, and community-based protest activity will be hard to sustain in the absence of ongoing workplace organization or networks of some sort.

Now, many Fight for 15 organizers point out SEIU is the only big union gambling on trying to organize an industry with millions of unorganized workers, and it's putting thousands of workers in motion. Organizing low-wage workers is a long overdue response to the neoliberal turn that dealt a historic defeat to organized labour during the 1980s. Millions of new jobs are [projected](#) to be in occupations like food prep, retail, and healthcare aides that pay \$9 to \$12 an hour. The jobs have few benefits, schedules and hours are erratic and there tends to be high turnover. This is the base for Fight for 15, OUR Walmart and a broader campaign known as [15 Now](#), initiated by the Seattle-based Socialist Alternative.

### Class-Struggle Unionism?

A fundamental goal of labour organizing is to take labour out of competition with itself. But that is nearly impossible when low-skilled, low-wage workers have few rights and number in the tens of millions. Fight for 15's approach is unorthodox, but it is constrained by organized labour's history. Class-struggle unionism has been abandoned by labour leaders who act as junior partners to corporations, like SEIU and Kaiser Permanente, the UAW and auto companies, the machinists union and Boeing, and the building trades and real-estate developers. Many union leaders are also in the pocket of the Democratic Party despite it being in the pocket of Wall Street.

Fight for 15 is trying to make trouble for global corporations, but it's not pursuing a working-class struggle. (Few unions are interested in that; that's the job of the organized left.) Fight for 15 is more of a legal and public relations campaign, as I explain, than an organizing campaign. It is bearing fruit, but mainly as a spillover than in the fast-food sector. This includes [adjunct professor](#) organizing, which with the assistance of unions, especially SEIU, have notched many victories since 2013. Thousands of [healthcare workers](#), who make up

about half of SEIU's membership, are agitating for \$15 an hour, which is also in response to the 2014 Supreme Court [ruling](#) that imposed limits on union membership for home-care aides. There are also linkages with the Black Lives Matter movement, which is significant given Fight for 15 is the biggest mobilization of African-American workers since the 1960s. While these are inchoate forms of solidarity and social-justice unionism, they remain underdeveloped because of the top-down nature of Fight for 15.

The most intriguing outcomes of Fight for 15 are citywide campaigns for a raise in the minimum wage, which has opened up organizing space for the left. Fifteen dollars an hour is now reality in Seattle, albeit with loopholes, with most low-wage workers expected to earn that by 2017. San Francisco's ballot measure for \$15 an hour was spearheaded by SEIU Local 1021, which one observer calls a model for a worker-run union. Fight for \$15 campaign helped legitimize the idea in Seattle. The local SEIU affiliate's biggest contribution was a \$15-an-hour ballot measure that won in the SeaTac suburb. But the heavy lifting was done by Socialist Alternative and its inside and outside political approach, aggressive reporting and support from *The Stranger*, a well-regarded newsweekly, and incoming Mayor Ed Murray's decision to back the measure and establish a committee to shape, for good and bad, the final bill. 15 Now is currently pushing \$15 an hour statewide in Oregon and according to sources is encountering resistance from some unions that are reluctant to challenge Democratic politicians.

### Organizing in a Digital Age

In terms of Fight for 15, its efforts have been more effective in the digital realm than in the real world when it comes to fast-food workers. One Fight for 15 organizer says, "SEIU would like the public to perceive this as a large and growing movement creating a crisis. They are creating the perception of a wave."

But the campaign is also hamstrung, and SEIU's media-centric strategy inhibits it from making hay from it. The organizer explains, "Workers are afraid to stand up. The number one problem is fear. I would say less than 4 per cent of the workers we contact stay on board. They jump on and jump off [Fight for 15] all the time." Workers have every reason to be afraid. One [study](#) from 2005 estimated 23,000 workers a year are penalized or fired for legitimate union activity, making a mockery of laws meant to protect workplace organizing.

A rich account of the difficulty and potential of worker-run, shop-based organizing in the fast-food industry is provided by Erik Forman in [New Forms of Worker Organization](#). He recounts an IWW campaign in Jimmy John's sandwich shops in Minneapolis, which narrowly lost a union vote but gained many concessions, wage increases and most important, worker consciousness, solidarity and power. Provocations and illegal acts by the bosses were used to build organization and militancy, not shunted over to law firms and P.R. agencies as in Fight for 15. But the campaign was dealt a serious blow by the mass firing of six organizers. (Forman's scathing critique of a complacent union bureaucracy as an outcome of labour law and how labour law proved to be a dead end is also important to consider.)

SEIU has far more resources to confront employer threats of firing and retaliation, but creating a shop-by-shop base of power would still be a monumental task. Fight for 15 could nurture worker power other ways, but it has forgone a bottom-up struggle. Its worker leaders serve to energize other workers, relate a compelling personal story and act as a media spokesperson. In other words, they provide the image of a leader rather than the substance of a leader who can organize the workplace, engage in shop-floor warfare against

the boss, develop worker solidarity, and force concessions while building a militant rank and file.

The site of worker power in Fight for 15 is supposed to be the organizing committees, but within the staff-driven campaign participants say workers have little power. Strike votes are usually not held unless the staff leadership is confident it will win. Meetings are for pumping up workers and feeding them information, not democratic debate and decision-making. The annual Fight for 15 conferences, with the next one reportedly set for this summer in Detroit, are described as heavily scripted. I asked one organizer if it was true that worker leaders made decisions during weekly national conference calls. The response was, "That's bullshit, and I know because I participate in those calls." Plus, one person says during a strategy session Scott Courtney was introduced to workers as "the reason you are all here." Compare this SEIU's claim in 2013 that it is [following the lead](#) of fast-food workers and "We don't yet understand the scale of it" when in fact it gave birth to the fast-food workers' campaign.

Where there is organizing in Fight for 15, it is more in the streets than in the workplace. The big days of action are vital for the sense of momentum. Allies from community groups, students and union staff swell numbers, add to the festivity, make a more favorable media impression, sway public opinion, and make it look as if the campaign is growing.

One can make the case that SEIU made a sound decision in forgoing a worker-centric campaign for a P.R. and legal strategy. But then it can no longer be said to be a worker-driven movement. If SEIU admitted workers' fear of being fired or disciplined by employers leads to high turnover in Fight for 15, it would undermine the perception that more and more fast-food workers are joining and staying with the campaign. A lack of power also means workers follow the dictates of paid organizers, who in turn say they get their marching orders from SEIU leaders.

A few organizers have mentioned SEIU's P.R. firm, BerlinRosen Public Affairs, is involved in the strategy. In fact, a 25-page document entitled "Strike in a Box," which bears BerlinRosen's logo, is presented as a how-to-guide for building a successful strike. This and other documents provide more evidence for the top-down management of Fight for 15, which is logical given the enormous effort devoted to organizing just one protest in one city. The fact that Fight for 15 staged more than 200 protests in U.S. cities [on April 15](#) indicates how many resources SEIU has committed.

### "Strike in a Box"

For example, one fast-food protest in 2013 was run like a military campaign. The staffing plan included the local organizing leadership, four different media workers, half-a-dozen "defusers" to soothe any trouble, a photographer, videographer, police liaison, chant leader and energizer, a supply team, drivers, onsite legal, a criminal lawyer on standby, breakfast and lunch coordinators, and people designated to hand out signs, flags, t-shirts, and water. A spreadsheet mapped out protests by the minute, noting times and location for loading vans, picking up workers, talking points for press conferences, skits, prayers, dancing in the streets, and "walk backs" of workers the next day to minimize retaliation. Insiders say to maximize turnout, Fight for 15 will sometimes rent hotel rooms for workers the night before a protest, rent vans to drive them to the start point, and provide meals.

Strike in a Box appears to be from an earlier stage of Fight for 15, but it is insightful. It starts with a "Legal FAQ" that describes different types of strikes under labour law. It cautions

against any conduct that can be classified as picketing because “picketing is considered coercive and incurs more liability for the union,” such as forcing a union election. Instead it says to focus on unfair labour practices as “ULP strikes are the legal crown jewel of strikes.”

The document gives tips for discovering, recording and tracking unfair labour practices. Workers in various Fight for 15 chapters say uncovering ULPs became a priority nearly two years ago, with organizers regularly asking for incidences of employer retaliation or discrimination.

The link between the legal and media strategy is in the section on “Site Assessments,” which begins by asking how many active and strong ULP’s there are at a particular establishment. The section also asks if it’s a good site to focus on, the existence of strong leaders, and then shifts to questions about messaging:

- “Is it an iconic brand?
- Does the brand help tell a story, locally and/or nationally?
- Do we have spokespeople? Trained? Reliable? Experienced?
- Do we have stories? Compelling worker stories
- Horror stories about site practices (wage theft, sexual harassment, etc)
- Connection to broader themes (cutting hours because of Obamacare, etc)”

Much of the remainder of Strike in a Box is devoted to recruiting workers with strong stories, organizing the strike vote, how to build a “pull plan” to maximize strike-day turnout, shoring up workers confidence, carrying out the actual strike, and the need for compelling visuals, stories and a narrative. Little is said about workplace organizing. This matches the experiences of many workers in the campaign who say they are not provided with any training on how to build shop-floor organization.

#### Questions for the Left

None of this is meant to dismiss Fight for 15. It is having a more profound effect than anyone could have hoped for when it began. But politics don’t just happen. By denying a central role SEIU leaders can deflect questions about controversial strategies and on-the-ground organizing. Likewise, analyzing strategy and tactics years from now is little use in books few people will read. There are many more questions that can and should be asked about Fight for 15.

For example, the campaign is focused primarily on wages and then on scheduling. But once they clock out, fast-food workers confront the dilemmas of childcare, healthcare, transportation, and rent. Fight for 15 talks about the difficulty of living on a poverty wage, but does so in moralistic terms: “fairness.” It avoids a deeper critique because “the goal is a contract.” As much as workers need a pay raise, \$15 an hour is of little help in many cities where the average rent on a one-bedroom apartment would eat up the entire income of a full-time worker on this wage. In Seattle, Socialist Alternative has pivoted to organizing around runaway rents, but it’s rare for big unions to seriously organize around rent control or tenants’ rights despite the fact that escalating housing costs are one of the biggest burdens that workers shoulder.

Beyond issues of daily life is workers’ role in the labour process. Building worker power would stop promotional campaigns like McDonald’s embarrassing “Pay with Love” or Starbucks clumsy “Race Together” before they happen. This is not all the responsibility of

one organizing campaign but without a serious debate about the strategy Fight for 15 is pursuing and shifting to worker-oriented strategies, it's hard to see how wage gains will translate into a gain of power for workers.

The campaign has raised hopes on the left of a revival of class consciousness and a working-class movement, but will it come to fruition under SEIU? If history and current events are any guide, the missing ingredient is the organized left. It's anarchists who made Occupy Wall Street happen, socialists who have revitalized many teachers unions, and socialists and the left that have turned \$15 an hour into reality. Without a similar effort, Fight for 15 may give fast-food workers more change in their pockets, but not the power to change their lives. •

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