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# In New Wave of Walkouts, Fast-Food Strikers Gain Momentum

By [STEVEN GREENHOUSE](#)



As a wave of one-day walkouts by fast-food workers gains momentum in a push for a \$15 hourly wage, the movement has been notable both for the prominence of young faces and for the audacity of their demand.

On Thursday, the protests involved workers at nearly 1,000 restaurants in more than 50 cities, organizers said, spreading to areas of the South and West including Atlanta, Los Angeles, Memphis, and Raleigh, N.C.

The Service Employees International Union has provided financial support to the one-day walkouts since they began a month ago at restaurants of McDonald's, Burger King and other chains in seven cities. Many and perhaps most of the workers have been in their 20s.

Jake Rosenfeld, a sociology professor and labor expert at the University of Washington, said the strikes could elevate the union movement's standing among younger workers who have grown up in an era when unions have

steadily lost membership and power.

“It should reinforce the labor movement as something new and relevant to the young workers of today,” Professor Rosenfeld said. And pointing to the use of the Internet to spread the strike call, he added, “The combination of old and new organizing strategies really seems to have paid off here.”

But even with the attention the strikes have drawn, the big question remains whether the walkouts can achieve any traction on the main demand — the wage increase to \$15 an hour in an industry in which [many of the 2.3 million fast food workers earn the federal minimum](#) of \$7.25 an hour.



Gretchen Ertl for The New York Times Demonstrators at a Burger King in Boston on Thursday. A month after fast-food workers staged a strike in seven cities, the protests spread to more than 50 cities.

Arne Kalleberg, a sociology professor at the University of North Carolina and author of the book “[Good Jobs, Bad Jobs](#),” said: “The strikes are an indication of a great frustration that’s been building up over a long time. It reflects the fact that people are really concerned with increasing inequality.”

One such frustrated worker was Roberto Tejada, who earns \$8 an hour at a Taco Bell in Los Angeles. “People can’t survive on the minimum wage,” he said. “Nobody who works full time should live in poverty.”

Labor Secretary Thomas E. Perez has [pointed to the strikes](#) as evidence that the federal minimum wage should be increased. President Obama has [proposed a \\$9 minimum wage](#), but many Republicans have denounced the idea, saying it would eliminate jobs.

Steve Caldeira, president of the International Franchise Association, warned that a raise to \$15 an hour would hurt franchisees – and would result in less hiring. “Mandating increased wages would lead to higher prices for consumers, lower foot traffic” and lost jobs, he said.

And a corporate-backed group, the Employment Policies Institute, ran a full-page advertisement in The Wall Street Journal, saying that a \$15 wage would mean “fewer entry-level jobs and more automated alternatives – even in the kitchen.”

The strike’s organizers have had feverish discussions – including a meeting with academics in Las Vegas – to figure out how to attain their goal. One idea is to persuade city councils to pass a \$15-an-hour minimum wage for fast-food workers. Another is not to hit up hard-pressed franchisees for the raises, but instead to get the chains to channel some of the fees they obtain from franchises into higher wages.

Mary Kay Henry, president of the Service Employees International Union, said the expansion of the strikes was helping to persuade government officials and community groups that the demand was not unrealistic.

“It’s moving people to understand that \$15 is increasingly reasonable,” she said. “It’s becoming crystal clear to a lot of people that if these workers who earn \$9,000 a year could earn \$18,000, that could make a big change in their neighborhoods.”

But Professor Kalleberg acknowledged that the chains would not be so easily persuaded.

“You’ll have to put consumer pressure on the companies,” he said. “The consumer is the lever here. I don’t know how about \$15. Obama is having a problem getting to \$9. I think something in between may be realistic.”

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