

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE FAST FOOD INDUSTRY

- Although a world without fast-food may seem unimaginable to people my age or younger, the fast food industry is relatively new

- It was started in the 1950s by a group of businessmen whose primary aim from the outset was to reduce costs to the lowest possible level. This is the principle that has guided the development of this industry in the decades since

- They were able to accomplish this goal through a number of means. One was by making customers do the work for them, ordering food at a counter, taking it back to their seat themselves, and carrying their own garbage to the trashbin, which eliminated the need for waiters and bus boys.

- Another was to create the franchise system, which allowed them to maintain control over the product, and give them a guaranteed rate of return, while at the same time allowing local owners to create a low-wage work force best suited to local conditions

- Another, perhaps the most important way that they were able to reduce costs was through the implementation of a

production process that generated some of America's first industrial magnates - the assembly-line model

- In his book "Fast Food Nation" Eric Schlosser writes "for the first time, the guiding principles of a factory assembly line were applied to a commercial kitchen. The new division of labor meant that a worker only had to be taught how to perform one task. Skilled and expensive short order cooks were no longer necessary... instead of relying upon a small, stable, well-paid, and well-trained workforce, the fast food industry seeks out unskilled workers who are willing to accept low pay."

- its worth

- The part at the end there where he talks about low pay can't be stressed enough.

- In 1972, McDonald's own Ray Kroc lobbied Congress and the White House to pass new legislation, known as the McDonald's bill, that would allow employers to pay 16 and 17 year olds 20% below the minimum wage.

- In describing his own business philosophy, Kroc was later quoted as saying "This is rat eat rat, dog eat dog. I'll kill 'em, and I'm going to kill 'em before they kill me. You're talking about the American way of survival of the fittest."

- Referring to his competitors, he said "If they were drowning to death, I would put a hose in their mouth."

- What Ray Kroc expresses in these statements is the logic of capitalism taken to its fullest, and it's this logic that made the fast food industry what it is today.

THE PROBLEM WITH THE FAST FOOD INDUSTRY

- Fast food, and the current culture that surrounds it, is immense. The golden arches have become an American icon, although it today has locations in 119 countries worldwide (there are only 196 countries in the world in total, just to put that number in perspective). It's no accident that the grip of fast food on the American psyche is so deep - marketing experts have worked tirelessly to keep fast food in the forefront of America's food choices, even selecting a color scheme - red & yellow - that, according to studies, is said to induce hunger.

- While existing in 119 countries, fast food is not only a global industry, its also one of the most profitable. According to the National Restaurant Association - the other NRA - fast food today is a \$683 billion dollar industry, with the average CEO making over 1000x more than the average worker.

- These are among the most well paid executives in the country, while their workers are among the lowest paid, most making just above minimum wage. It's almost as if their wealth is a result of their workers' poverty... (I've seen this movie before)

- Compounding the problem of poor wages is the extremely common occurrence of wage theft in the industry

- In a survey done by New York City's Fast Food Forward, 84% of respondents reported being victims of wage theft over the last year.

- Wage theft can take the form of workers being required to work while off the clock, cashiers being required to pay their employer if their register is short, or workers not receiving overtime pay for working over 40 hours/week

- Paid little, subjected to wage theft, workers are treated as only another expendable cog in the fast food assembly line. When they face an issue alone, their grievances usually go unnoticed, or in some rare cases where a worker knows and is willing to exert their rights, may come before the National Labor Relations Board.

- In the few instances where this happens, workers face courts that have become increasingly sympathetic towards employers, as almost a century of pro-employer court rulings has shown. Should they ultimately win some "justice", it is usually years after the dispute was raised, and the worker has likely moved on to some other job.

~~- One instance locally was the case of one Monroe County McDonalds worker who was fired for reporting a gas leak. After almost two years of deliberating the case in court (a demoralizing experience that frequently ends with a worker walking away out of frustration or exhaustion), the worker was finally awarded backpay. Another worker involved with the IWW's Starbucks Workers Union, who was fired for his organizing efforts in 2005, just last month won his job back after nine years of deliberating in court. Surely, relying on outside forces, forces not under our control, is the least effective way to solve the current crisis facing low-wage workers.~~

UNION - THE ONLY SOLUTION

- And that's why I would contend that worker self-organization - a union - is the only answer.

- I would distinguish here between the "traditional" NLRB organizing used by most of today's unions, which relies on state recognition of the union, and which shifts the focus away from winning demands, and instead frames the fight in terms of winning a vote. Instead, workers are engaging in a form union organizing which can still function even if the workers do not have a majority of support in their workplace. Instead of carefully tiptoeing through the minefield of pro-employer labor law, workers have engaged in direct action to apply pressure directly against the boss.

- Up until recently, such direct action has consisted mainly of strikes and pickets. However, at a recent convention of over 1,300 fast food workers, those in attendance committed unanimously to expanding their range of tactics to include civil disobedience.

- By using these tactics, workers have already won some significant victories. In a recent report submitted to the Securities and Exchange Commission, McDonalds acknowledged that "The impact of events such as boycotts, protests, or labor strikes can"... "adversely affect us" and may spur higher wages. Such an open acknowledgement of the impact of worker self-activity is rare and amounts an incredibly positive sign as to the effectiveness of these tactics.

- Most recently in Rochester, a workers strike at the East Ridge Wendy's forced them to close their doors during their morning shift, and bring the concerns of the workers there to the immediate attention of the bosses. Workers saw some small but immediate victories in the settlement of certain scheduling issues that had been ongoing at the store, and we can expect that more victories will follow the wider these strikes expand.

- That Victory is possible is unquestionable - Denmark fast food workers, for example, currently earn \$20/hr - far beyond the \$15 demanded by American workers. Yet what is