

Series of One-Day Strikes Hits the Fast Food Industry

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On May 15, 2013 and August 1, 2013 hundreds of Milwaukee fast-food workers walked off their jobs and launched separate one-day strikes demanding a raise to \$15 per hour and the right to unionize without intimidation or retaliation. The May 15 strike was the fifth one-day strike by fast food workers in six weeks, following strikes in St. Louis and Detroit the week before, and in New York and Chicago in April. There were also subsequent fast food workers' strikes in Seattle in May and in the District of Columbia in May and July. Another round of strikes took place last week in all these cities, including the August 1 strike in Milwaukee, plus Flint, Michigan and Kansas City, Missouri.

These strikes share several common characteristics. In each of these strikes, local groups organized fast food workers with support from the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), one of the nation's largest unions. All of these strikes were also preceded or followed by the filing of unfair labor practice charges against the employers with the National Labor Relations Board. In each strike, the striking workers were backed by ad hoc coalitions of unions and community groups. In the case of the Milwaukee strike, the organizing group was called "Wisconsin Citizen Action" and the campaign was called "Raise [sic] Up, MKE". The St. Louis campaign was called "STL Can't Survive on \$7.35", Detroit's was called "D15", and Seattle's was called "Strike Poverty and Raise Seattle."

These one-day strikes have all been part of "minority unionism" campaigns. In this type of campaign, the strikers' focus is on staging actions by a minority of the workforce, rather than waiting until they have gained support from a majority of the workers. The strikers' long-term goal with this approach is to gain community support and inspire their non-striking co-workers to organize. The short duration of this sort of strike is calculated to minimize the risk that employers will replace the striking workers after walking off their jobs.

These fast food strikes have taken place amid a long-term decline in strikes in the U.S. In 2012, there were only 19 major strikes and lockouts, as reported by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, and only 19 in 2011 as well. Both the fast-food and retail industries are largely not unionized. The strategy pursued by the groups organizing these strikes is to call attention to the wages and working conditions of the employees in these industries, and to put pressure on fast food industry employers to raise their wages.

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