Fast Food Workers' Labor Day Strike Echoes Martin Luther King's Dream

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Fast food and other organizations strike action for a living wage in Union Square, New York City on August 29. (Photo: The Eyes Of New York)

On Thursday, in anticipation of Labor Day weekend, thousands of workers at 1,000 fast food restaurants in 60 cities walked out on strike to protest their low wages, erratic schedules, lack of job security, miserable working conditions, and lack of benefits. The movement began last November in one city – New York. The idea has since spread. The protest is the largest mass action of fast food employees in history. If they reflect the nation's McWorkforce, many of them were Black and Latino. Their average age will be roughly 28. Many have children to house, clothes and feed, which is impossible on the minimum wages they are paid. They are demanding a living wage of $15 an hour and the right to unionize without employer resistance or retaliation.

The Service Employees International Union, which has provided support for the fast food workers' campaign, thinks America may be ready for an upsurge of activism not only among low-wage workers but also among middle-class employees who are sinking quickly, many with the additional burden of underwater homes.

What radicals once called the “objective conditions” seem ripe for such a mass protest movement. In a new report, A Decade of Flat Wages, economists Lawrence Mishel and Heidi Shierholz observe that "the vast majority of U.S. workers -- including white-collar and blue-collar workers and those with and without a college degree -- have endured more than a decade of wage stagnation."

Union activists know that American workers are filled with discontent. But sustained protest requires not only that people think that things *should* be different but also that they *can* be different. And that requires hope. If the fast food workers’ campaign captures the public’s imagination – and more importantly, wins some stepping-stone improvements at work -- it could help restore that missing ingredient, and perhaps contribute to launching a new wave of workplace activism.

Rev. Martin Luther King understood the importance of combining discontent and hope. It was the theme of his “I Have a Dream” speech. If he were still alive, King would certainly join those workers in their struggle against McDonalds, Taco Bell, Burger King, Dunkin’ Donuts, KFC, and the other large and profitable chains that pay their employees poverty-level wages. It is exactly the kind of poor people’s campaign he was planning in 1968 when he was assassinated in Memphis, where he’d gone to support striking garbage workers’ demands for safer conditions and better pay.

Most of Thursday's walk-out workers weren’t born yet when King told the world about his dream at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in 1963. So they probably don’t know that in addition to pushing for laws to expand voting rights, dismantle Jim Crow segregation in housing, public services, and employment, the march’s ten demands included full employment, expanded job training programs, and an increase of the federal minimum wage from $1.15 to $2 dollars an hour. That translates to $13.39 today – far more than today's $7.25 minimum wage.

Thanks to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, there are no more segregated restaurants, lunch counters, drinking fountains, parks, movie theaters, and universities. Thanks to the Voting Rights Act of 1965, blacks can exercise their right to vote. In 1963, there were only five African-Americans in Congress - all from northern states. Today there are 45 black Congress members, many of them from the South. In 1970, there were only 1,469 black elected officials in the entire country. Today, that number has reached over 10,500. In the early 1960s, not a single major American city had a black mayor. In subsequent years, many major cities, including many with relatively few African-Americans, had elected black chief executives, including New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Atlanta, Dallas, San Francisco, Denver, Seattle and Philadelphia. And in 2008, and again in 2012, Americans elected an African-American as president of the United States. Thanks to a Supreme Court ruling in 1967, laws banning interracial marriage (which still existed in 16 states) have disappeared. Thanks to the Fair Housing Act of 1968 and the Community Reinvestment Act of 1977, landlords, realtors, and banks can no longer legally engage in the blatant racial discrimination that was once commonplace and which resulted in urban ghettoes and all-white suburbs.

King was proud of the civil rights movement's accomplishments in his lifetime and would have been proud of those successes that came after he died. But he realized that dismantling Jim Crow laws was only part of the dream of social justice. "What good is having the right to sit at a lunch counter," King asked, "if you can't afford to buy a hamburger?"

Today he'd be helping labor leaders who are discussing how to revitalize their movement, which has fallen on tough times as a result of intense attacks by corporate America in both the workplace and political arenas. He recognized that a strong labor movement is needed if working families are to share in society's prosperity.

King was born in Atlanta in 1929, the son of a prominent black minister. Despite growing up in a solidly middle-class family, King saw the widespread human suffering caused by the Depression, particularly in the black community. During King's first year at Morehouse College, civil rights and labor activist A. Philip Randolph, a socialist, spoke on campus. Randolph predicted that the near future would witness a global struggle that would end white supremacy and capitalism. He urged the students to link up with "the people in the shacks and the hovels," who, although "poor in property," were "rich in spirit." King never forgot that lesson. In 1950, while in graduate school, he wrote an essay describing the "anti-capitalistic feelings" he experienced as a result of seeing unemployed people standing in breadlines.

King began his activism in Montgomery as a crusader against racial segregation, but the struggle for civil rights radicalized him into a fighter for broader economic and social justice and peace. In the last decade of his life, King dedicated himself to addressing the wider cause of economic justice and equality. Mentored by Randolph and Randolph's protégé, Bayard Rustin, King believe it was necessary to build bridges between the civil rights and labor movements, as historian Michael Honey has documented in his important book, *All Labor Has Dignity*, a collection of King's speeches and writings on labor issues.

King was invited to address the AFL-CIO's annual convention in December 1961 in Florida. Speaking to a room filled with union delegates – almost all of them white men -- King reminded them of the labor movement's important role in giving workers a voice in their workplaces and their society:

"This revolution within industry was fought bitterly by those who blindly believed their right to uncontrolled profits was a law of the universe, and that without the maintenance of the old order, catastrophe faced the nation."

King observed: "The labor movement did not diminish the strength of the nation but enlarged it. By raising the living standards of millions, labor miraculously created a market for industry and lifted the whole nation to undreamed of levels of production. Those who today attack labor forget these simple truths, but history remembers them."

Noting the common ground of the civil rights and labor movements, King pointed out:

"Negroes are almost entirely a working people ... Our needs are identical with labor's needs: decent wages, fair working conditions, livable housing, old-age security, health and welfare measures, conditions in which families can grow, have education for their children and respect in the community. That is why Negroes support labor's demands and fight laws which curb labor. That is why the labor-hater and labor-baiter is virtually always a twin-headed creature, spewing anti-Negro epithets from one mouth and anti-labor propaganda from the other mouth."

King ended his AFL-CIO speech in words that would soon become familiar to every American. Looking forward to a day when the nation's prosperity would be widely shared, regardless of race or religion, King said: "Yes, this will be the day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands all over this nation and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual: 'Free at last, free at last, thank God Almighty, we are free at last."

It is no accident that the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, where King delivered his famous “I Have a Dream Speech” was Randolph’s brainchild.

Randolph had spent decades organizing black workers, fighting to dismantle segregation within the labor movement, and forging alliances between unions and civil rights group. Under Randolph’s influence, most of the march’s key organizers had backgrounds in the labor movement. The two biggest constituencies participating in the march came from Black churches and unions, who brought busloads and trainloads of members to the nation’s capital. Unions also made the largest financial contribution to the march’s modest coffers. Walter Reuther, the head of the then-powerful United Auto Workers union, was one of the ten speakers that day and later joined his civil rights comrades at a meeting with President Kennedy.

It was John Lewis, the chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the youngest speaker at the March on Washington, who set the stage for King’s address by emphasizing the exploitation of Black workers at a time when about half of all Blacks lived in poverty. “We march today for jobs and freedom, but we have nothing to be proud of, for hundreds and thousands of our brothers are not here, for they are receiving starvation wages or no wages at all,” Lewis said. “We must have legislation that will protect the Mississippi sharecroppers, who have been forced to leave their homes because they dared to exercise their right to register to vote. We need a bill that will provide for the homeless and starving people of this nation. We need a bill that will ensure the equality of a maid who earns five dollars a week in the home of a family whose total income is $100,000 a year.”

In his “I Have a Dream” speech, King noted that Black poverty was particularly outrageous in the context of the nation’s increasing affluence. One hundred years after the Emancipation Proclamation, King said, the Black American still “lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity…an exile in his own land.”

King made it a priority to meet frequently with union leaders and speak to labor groups. He walked a careful tightrope, emphasizing their common goals but also reminding them of the special burden facing Black Americans. Addressing a meeting of Teamsters union shop stewards in 1967, King said, "Negroes are not the only poor in the nation. There are nearly twice as many white poor as Negro, and therefore the struggle against poverty is not involved solely with color or racial discrimination but with elementary economic justice."

In early 1968, King told journalist David Halberstam, "For years I labored with the idea of reforming the existing institutions of society, a little change here, a little change there. Now I feel quite differently. I think you've got to have a reconstruction of the entire society, a revolution of values."

King kept trying to build a broad movement for economic justice. In January 1968 he announced plans for a Poor People's Campaign, a series of protests to be led by an interracial coalition of poor people and their allies among the middle-class liberals, unions, religious organizations, and other progressive groups, to pressure the White House and Congress to expand the war against poverty.

In 1968, at the request of local church and union leaders, King traveled to Memphis, to lend his support to striking African American garbage workers and to gain recognition for their union. It was there, on April 4, that he was assassinated, a month before the first protest action of the Poor People's Campaign in Washington, DC.

King recognized that many Black Americans viewed labor unions with suspicion. During the first half of the 20th century, many unions -- particularly the older craft unions -- were often hostile to Blacks workers. Many white workers sought to protect their hard-won gains and viewed Blacks as a threat rather than as fellow workers. Employers often recruited and hired Blacks, and sometimes Latinos, as strikebreakers to exacerbate racial tensions. Some unions thus helped contribute to racial segregation in American workplaces, with Blacks relegated to the lowest-paying, dirtiest, and most dangerous jobs.

Union strength reached its peak (at one-third of the workforce) in the United States

from the mid-1950s until the early 1960s. The labor movement lifted a majority of Americans -- union members and non-union members alike -- into the middle class. Unions raised wages, expanded health insurance and paid vacations, and successfully pushed for safer workplaces. They joined forces with the civil rights movement, feminists, consumer groups, and environmentalists to mobilize for more protections against business abuses. Not surprisingly, from the late 1940s through the early 1970s, America became the world's first middle class country. As its economy prospered, the gap between the richest Americans and the rest narrowed significantly.

But it was not until the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s that Black Americans began to gain a fairer slice of these postwar economic gains. With organized labor finally becoming an ally, the civil rights crusade helped many Black Americans move into the economic mainstream. They gained access to good-paying jobs—in factories, government agencies, and the professions—that had previously been off-limits. In unionized firms, the wage gap between Black and white workers narrowed significantly.

Labor's growing influence – along with the burgeoning of the consumer and environmental movements -- frightened big business. So, beginning in the 1970s, corporate America reorganized itself to attack the union movement and its support for stronger government regulations, more progressive taxes, and a broader social safety net for the poor, the elderly, and children. Major corporations beefed up their Washington, DC influence-peddling operations, created new lobbying groups like the Business Roundtable and the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), funded conservative foundations and think tanks that challenged unions' and government's role in society, and poured significantly more resources into helping elect anti-union politicians.

In the past few decades, corporations have spent billions on union-busting consultants to intimidate employees. According to a 2011 study by Kate Bronfenbrenner of Cornell University and Dorian Warren of Columbia University, employers racheted up their anti-union tactics designed to frighten and demoralize employees, including "threats, interrogation, surveillance, fear, coercion, violence, retaliation and harassment for union activity, promises and bribes, and election and union interferences. Employers penalize workers in many ways; by transferring them to more onerous work assignments, cutting wages or benefits, layoffs, and, most egregiously, discharging workers or shutting down, contracting out, or outsourcing all or part of the facility."

Employers who harass or fire workers illegally during union organizing campaigns suffer few consequences. The lucky workers get reinstated years later after exhaustive court battles. Penalties for these violations are so minimal that most employers treat them as a minor cost of doing business. Employees who initially signed union cards are often long gone or too afraid to vote by the time the National Labor Relations Board, the federal agency, conducts an election.

Wal-Mart and other employers require workers to attend meetings on work time during which company managers give anti-union speeches, show anti-union films, and distribute anti-union literature. Unions have no equivalent rights of access to employees. To reach them, organizers must visit their homes or hold secret meetings. Under current NLRB regulations, any employer with a clever attorney can stall union elections, giving management time to scare the living daylights out of potential recruits.

In recent years, several states adopted anti-union “right to work” laws that allow workers to get the benefits of union contracts without having to pay union membership dues. These laws not only endanger unions’ financial foundation but also make it harder to win union elections. Last December, Gov. Rick Snyder of Michigan – once a bastion of union power – signed two bills making it the 24th "right-to-work" state.

The corporate assault on unions worked. Americans today have far fewer rights at work than employees in other democratic societies. Not surprisingly, American workers work longer hours, have no mandated paid vacations, earn less pay with fewer benefits – and pay more for housing, health care, and college – than their counterparts elsewhere.

Several decades of corporate-backed assaults on unions have left only 11.3 percent of workers – and 6.6 percent of private sector employees with -- union cards. (Black workers had a slightly higher union membership rate - 13.4 percent). The U.S. now has by far the lowest level of unionization of any major democratic country. More than half of America’s 14.4 million union members now work for government (representing 36 percent of all government employees), so business groups and conservative politicians have targeted public sector unions for destruction, including recent attacks on teachers, cops, firefighters, human service workers and other public sector workers in Wisconsin, Michigan, Ohio and elsewhere—the most ferocious anti-union crusade in decades.

America is now in the midst of a new Gilded Age with a new group of corporate Robber Barons, many of them operating on a global scale. The top one percent of the income scale has the biggest concentration of income and wealth since the Great Depression.

This situation should be ripe for a new wave of union drives. But current federal laws are an impediment to union organizing rather than a protector of workers' rights. The rules are stacked against workers, making it extremely difficult for even the most talented organizers to win union elections.

Business leaders argue that employees' anti-union attitudes account for the decline in membership. In fact, polls show that about half of non-managerial workers would join a union if they could. But they won't vote for a union, much less participate openly in a union-organizing drive, if they fear losing their jobs for doing so.

When Obama took office in 2009, with a Democratic majority in both houses of Congress, labor leaders hoped that he would work to update federal labor laws to level the playing field between workers and bosses. But Obama calculated that business lobby groups were so powerful – and so willing to spend whatever it took to beat back efforts to enact the Employee Free Choice Act – that he couldn’t get enough Democrats to vote for the change. The bill died a quiet death. In the current political climate, union leaders don’t think that any version of EFCA is likely to get through Congress.

If unions can’t rely on NLRB elections to win collective bargaining agreements, how can they challenge the nation’s growing economic divide, the proliferation of low-wage jobs, and the hollowing out of the middle class?

Some union leaders have given up and expect that within a decade or two, the labor movement will virtually disappear within the private sector industries and will face further assaults on the 36% of public sector employees who are union members.

But most union leaders believe that they can overcome the obstacles and rebuild the labor movement to address 21st century realities. They see hope in the growing number of workers – especially young workers, women, and Blacks and Latinos – who express support for union efforts. Some unions are devoting more resources to organizing campaigns, hoping to build on a handful of recent successes among hotel workers, nurses, janitors, employees in food processing plants, security guards, and other sectors.

They see hope, too, in the growing number of successful campaigns to increase minimum wages at the local and state levels. The crusade for local "living wage" laws, which began in the 1990s, is one of the labor movement's most unsung victories. Working with community and faith-based groups, unions have persuaded local officials in over 150 cities to require employers who do business with municipal government to pay its workers one, two, three and in some cases four dollars more than the official minimum wage. Several cities have passed citywide minimum wage laws that apply to all or most employees – now $10.55 in San Francisco, $10.51 in Santa Fe, $10 in San Jose, and $8.50 in Albuquerque. Last November, voters in Long Beach, CA, a city of over 450,000 with a large tourism economy, approved a minimum wage of $13.00 an hour (which will increase annually with the rate of inflation) as well as at least five days of paid sick leave a year, for employees of large hotels with 100 or more rooms. The hotel workers union built a coalition that included community groups, faith-based groups, and small business owners (who expected workers to spend much of their additional income in local stores). Washington, D.C. recently passed a law establishing a minimum wage of $12.50 for employees of big-box stores, including Wal-Mart. Nineteen states have their own minimum wage laws set above the $7.25 federal level. The highest is Washington State, where the current minimum wage is $9.19 an hour. In November, New Jersey voters will likely approve a ballot measure raising the state minimum wage to $8.25.

In July, workers at a huge warehouse in Mira Linda, CA, which contracts with Wal-Mart to move its goods from the Los Angeles port to distribution centers, protested their meager pay ($8.50 an hour), unsafe conditions, and mistreatment with demonstrations, strikes, and lawsuits. Even without a union contract, they won major improvements in pay and benefits. The warehouse employees are part of Warehouse Workers United, an initiative of the Change to Win union federation.

National Nurses United has significantly increased its membership in recent years, winning union drives at hospitals around the corner. In the past year, NNU affiliates have won first-time contracts for registered nurses at hospitals in Chicago, St. Louis, South Florida, Santa Monica, and El Paso, Corpus Christi and Brownsville, Texas.

One of labor's signal victories, the Occupational Health and Safety Act, has saved tens of thousands of lives and millions of injuries since Congress adopted the law in 1970. But business groups and their Republican allies have never been happy with OSHA and have worked consistently to weaken its regulations and slash its research and enforcement budget. Unions have pushed hard to strengthen OSHA, often without success, but last week the Obama administration came through with two significant improvements. OSHA issued long-awaited regulations designed to limit workers' exposure to dangerous silica dust, typically released at construction sites, shipyards and other workplaces where heavy machinery is used and which is associated with lung cancer and silicosis, among other ailments. The same week, U.S. Mine Safety and Health

Administration asked the White House to approve new rules aimed at ending deadly black lung disease among the nation's coal miners – a change that Republicans have held up but which Obama is expected to OK.

These victories show that the labor movement, with over 14 million members, can still exercise political clout. But no list of recent labor victories can obscure the steady drip, drip of decline in members and political influence. For years, many union leaders were in denial, unable to face this harsh reality.

But in the past few years, and especially this year, labor leaders have recognized that doing things the same way will only lead to further erosion and eventual extinction. In the past year, a number of labor leaders have begun serious conversations about their movement's future. They've begun holding meetings amongst themselves and with community organizing groups, academics and think tank experts, sympathetic employers, and friendly politicians to explore new approaches to organizing low-wage workers, whether or not the employees join a union or win a collective bargaining agreement.

SEIU has launched a series of reports and gatherings to rethink labor's role and strategy. So has the AFL-CIO, which is devoting much of this year's annual meeting in Los Angeles to discussions within its ranks and with allies about new directions.

The unions hope to learn lessons from several recent experiments and pilot projects, like the living wage campaigns, the growing number of "worker centers" that use lawsuits and publicity to win back pay for immigrant workers, the burgeoning activism of Wal-Mart workers and warehouse employees, and SEIU's Fight for a Fair Economy campaign, launched in 2011 to build links between community organizing groups and low-wage employees in over 20 cities (an initiative that spawned the current fast food workers campaign).

Just as King saw an affinity between the labor and civil rights movements, some unions today are reaching out join forces with other social justice movements, not simply to enlist help for union drives but to offer help on other issues that concern working families.

In Los Angeles, for example, the Teamsters union has been working with environmental, public health, and community groups to clean up the nation's largest and dirtiest port, where the pollution from ships and trucks poisons the air and leads to high rates of asthma among children and heart disease among truck drivers. As the Teamsters help the truckers with health and safety issues they also hope to enlist them in union campaigns, and expect that their new-found environmental and community friends will support their efforts.

For years, Wal-Mart, the nation's largest employer with over one million workers, has repelled all efforts by its so-called "associates" to unionize. They had union-busting down to a science. But in the past two years, the tide has slowly shifted. Wal-Mart employees started OUR Wal-Mart (Organization United for Respect at Wal-Mart) and last year staged a number of high-profile walkouts to draw attention to their plight. Because so many other constituency groups have grievances against the corporation– including women, small business, environmentalists, human rights groups concerned about overseas sweatshops (where Wal-Mart makes its toys and clothing), and immigrants – the walk-outs mobilized widespread support. With the support of the United Food and Commercial Workers, a growing number of Wal-Mart employees are laying the foundation for a new wave of activism to improve their pay and working conditions.

When Occupy Wall Street erupted in September 2011, most unions were wary of the movement's anarchistic tendencies and lack of specific demands. But since then, a growing number of effective community organizing groups have battled big banks over issues of predatory lending and foreclosures, successfully pressuring federal, state and local elected officials to hold banks accountable. In several cities – including Seattle, North Las Vegas, and Richmond, CA – the Service Employees Union is working with community groups to pursue a strategy to help lower mortgage payments for "underwater" homeowners by getting local governments to purchase the mortgages by eminent domain and modify them to reflect current market values.

In the past decade, the labor movement has embraced the crusade for immigrant rights, reversing its long-held opposition to legalizing undocumented workers. Some of labor's most impressive victories have been among immigrant workers in hotels, hospitals, meatpacking plants, nursing homes. The AFL-CIO, UNITE Here, and SEIU have assigned staff to work closely with immigrant rights groups and to mobilize union members to push Congress to pass comprehensive legislation. The unions believe that this coalition, energized by young activists who call themselves Dreamers (a term that evokes King's speech), will pay dividends for the labor movement, even if the bill doesn't pass this year.

The civil rights movement blossomed during a period of growing prosperity, demanding that African Americans share in the nation's bounty. Today, America is once again prosperous, but working families – of all races – are not sharing in the good times. Since the Great Recession, corporate profits are up and productivity has increased by 7.7 percent, but wages have declined for the bottom 70 percent of workers. According to the authors of EPI's new *A Decade of Flat Wages* report, "the fruits of overall growth have accrued disproportionately to the richest households."

The biggest culprits are America's financial institutions, which made out like bandits thanks to two decades of deregulation, consolidation, and the federal bail-out. Wall Street has growing influence over corporate practices, pushing companies to reduce payroll, shed benefits for employees (like health insurance), and destroy what's left of the union presence in the private sector.

For most of the twentieth century, Labor Day was reserved for festive parades, picnics and speeches sponsored by unions in major cities. That changed in the 1970s. Unions in a few cities kept the tradition, but their numbers dwindled so much that it would be difficult to mount a decent parade in most locales. Most working families are typically so exhausted from over-work that they view Labor Day weekend as simply a chance to rest. Most of those families don't even realize that it was the labor movement that made the long Labor Day weekend – indeed, weekends in general – possible.

This year, however, thousands of workers spent Labor Day weekend in the streets, not as part of a parade but as part of a protest, on strike against fast food chains, or in solidarity with the strikers. If Rev. King were alive now, he'd be marching with them, eager to fulfill the unfinished dream he announced at the March on Washington.

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