

New Labor Organizing of Low-Paid Workers

By Sharryn Kasmir

The Fight for \$15 marks an important development in labor organizing in the U.S. For years, the fast food industry has been notoriously difficult to unionize. Seeing the difficult landscape for unionization, Service Employees Workers International Union (SEIU) and its community partners are developing a novel strategy. They coordinate multi-city and international job actions, build community support, pursue a media strategy, and mount political pressure to win a \$15 minimum hourly wage across the industry. The campaign is fought internationally, as well, with workers in some 40 countries involved in actions and lending support. Fight for \$15's success bolstered the Obama administration's efforts to raise the federal minimum wage and pushed Governor Cuomo in the same direction in New York State. In May, 2015, Governor Cuomo empaneled a wage board to investigate wages in the fast food sector; the board held four hearings throughout the state, including one on Long Island. Fight for \$15 rallied fast-food workers, community groups and allies to the hearings, demonstrating broad public support for the campaign. The wage board recommended raising the minimum fast food wage to \$15, to be phased in over six years in chains with 50 or more establishments statewide. At the time of the Hofstra event, fast-food corporations had filed an appeal of the wage board decision; the appeal has since been denied and the wage hike upheld. Fight for \$15 then took a leading role in pushing the governor to extend the \$15 hourly minimum to all New York State workers in every industry.

Ada Torres and Yancy Rivera have worked at Long Island McDonald's stores for many years. They talked with students about difficult working conditions and the personal sacrifices that their jobs involved. After years of service, they still earn poverty-level wages. Both summoned the courage to join the Fight for \$15 and to stand up to their employers. Olivia Santoro is an organizer with Long Island Progressive Coalition (LIPC), a community group involved in the campaign. Greg Reynoso is a Fight for \$15 organizer with SEIU, and he translated from Spanish for Ada and

Yancy. What follows is their discussion with students at a Hofstra Labor Studies panel on Oct. 28, 2015, as they spoke of their experiences and shared their perspectives on the campaign.

Ada Torres: My name is Ada Torres. I've worked at McDonald's for 13 years. I've got 13 years working overnight, because I don't really make enough to pay a babysitter during the day, so I have to take care of my kids during the day and work at night. Those 13 years, I only made \$10 an hour. Because at this point, they don't want to raise the minimum. They're saying that I already make enough money. With that money, I don't really have enough to save for my kids' careers in the future. One of them wants to be a doctor, and I don't really know how I'm going to do it. That's why we're fighting for \$15, and we want everybody to support us to make \$15 an hour. In the store that I work, we don't even have sick days in case we get sick or worse. Sometimes we're sick, and we have to go to work, just because we cannot afford to lose one day of work.

Olivia Santoro: I'm an organizer with the Long Island Progressive Coalition (LIPC.) Our role has been to support the campaign. We started when our Governor announced that the Labor Commissioner was creating a wage board. A wage board is used to investigate wages in a specific industry—in this case, the fast food industry, to determine whether or not those wages were adequate and to make appropriate recommendations. In learning that there were going to be hearings across the state and on Long Island, that's where my involvement and the involvement of LIPC started.

To give you a little background, during the spring months we were in the middle of the state budget season. That's when our elected officials are deciding what the state budget is going to be for the next year. In that budget, they can include changes to the state's minimum wage. Our State Assembly, State Senate and Governor all put forth different proposals about what they thought the minimum wage should be moving into the next year. We saw from

our Governor and State Assembly a push to raise the minimum wage. Governor Cuomo was pushing for \$11.50 in New York City and \$10.50 for the rest of the state. Our State Assembly put forth a similar plan, but they included Long Island in the higher wage tier because the cost of living is so high that they said that it should be included in a higher tier with New York City. They also proposed allowing local governments to have control to raise the wage up to 30% above the state minimum. In places across the state where the cost of living is high, local governments can say, "Hey, you know, this is not enough," and they can raise the wage up to 30% more.

But our State Senate proposal was that we don't change the minimum wage. So without any special action, the minimum wage will be \$9 an hour at the end of this year, up from \$8.75. So there were competing views about the minimum wage, and we get to the end of the budget season, and there's no change made in the next year's budget, largely blocked by our State Senate. But during this time, we can see that opinions are changing. We can see that our elected officials are recognizing that \$8.75 is just not enough for anyone in the state or across the country to live on.

So the momentum in the state is building to raise the wage. The Fight for \$15 is growing in New York, and across the country. About a month after the budget season ends at the beginning of May, the Governor published an op-ed in the New York Times saying that he is calling on our Labor Commissioner to create the wage board. He's recognizing that we need to do something different, that \$8.75 isn't working. We learned that there were going to be hearings across the state, including one on Long Island in mid-June. That's where my role at LIPC starts. To complement the amazing work that the fast-food workers were doing, our job was to organize allies, anybody who wasn't a fast-food worker themselves but supported raising the wage to \$15.

We were specifically looking for people who were leaders in their communities or leaders in their professions. Our goal was to get all those people out to the hearing to stand alongside the fast-food workers and testify that they're in support of raising the wage. The purpose of doing that was to show that Long Island is united, that people across different professions are standing together to say,

"Enough is enough." We really wanted to show that there was a lot of support for raising the wage all across the Island. When the hearing happened, and it's the culmination of several years of organizing that fast-food workers have done, and we're excited to see what the turnout is going to be. It was really a moving experience. There were several hundred people at that hearing, and out of at least 100 people who got up to testify only three spoke in opposition to raising the wage. It was very clear that there was overwhelming support from so many different types of people on Long Island, and that's the message that we wanted to send to the wage board.

The hearings wrapped up at the end of June, and not long after the wage board made their announcement that they were in fact going to raise the wage. It is a really exciting and powerful victory, and really speaks to the power of organizing and shows that workers are not going to stand for the poor treatment, that they deserve respect and fair wages from the companies they're working for.

Student: What were the arguments of the opponents of Fight for \$15?

Greg Reynoso: Some of the coverage was saying the fast-food jobs are only for teenagers who only worry to get new sneakers. We were able to prove that over 60% of workers have kids and families to support. Some say that the corporation doesn't make enough money to pay more, to pay better wages. We were able to

prove that McDonald's made more than \$100 million in profit last year, which just shows that they really have enough money to pay more to the workers.

Student: There are some people who say fast-food workers don't deserve \$15 an hour. What would you say to those people?

GR: Fast-food jobs, they're really hard. It's a really hard job. They deal with fryers; they get hurt at work. They get burns. So, yes, we surely believe that they deserve more. Any one, any single person who works 40 hours a week in this country should be able to make enough to not live in poverty. It doesn't matter what company, where you work, what you do.



McDonald's workers Yancy Rivera and Ada Torres and organizers Greg Reynoso and Olivia Santoro (above, left to right) came to Hofstra University on October 28, 2015 to talk with students about the Fight for \$15 campaign. Hofstra Professor Sharryn Kasmir moderated the event.

OS: I want to add to that if the minimum wage had kept up with inflation, it would actually be more than \$20. So the argument that fast-food workers are asking too much really doesn't stand any ground.

Student: You mentioned the issue of days off, and I was wondering whether the campaign has been trying to link higher wages with more benefits for fast-food workers, as well.

GR: In New York City they passed a law about sick days, because honestly, it's not really fair for people who are sick to go to work, and if they don't go, they're not going to get paid, you know? But the Fight for \$15, it's not only \$15 an hour. It's \$15 an hour and the right to form a union, with benefits that include insurance, sick days, personal days, vacation pay and other benefits. That's exactly why organizing is not only for \$15. We're also fighting for a union and benefits.

Yancy Rivera: So starting a campaign on June 5th of this year. First, I want to say thanks to the people who invited us at the beginning so we can be part of Fight for \$15, because through them we learned that we can do more. And now the Governor signed a law and I'm really happy that I'm going to be making more. I'm going to be able to do more for my family.

AT: I started with the campaign about a month ago. And, yeah, I felt really good, because \$15 an hour would be really, really good for my kids, because I've got three kids to support. I'm happy.

Student: Have the franchise owners that you work for individually tried to stop you or tried to like manipulate from not joining an organization?

YR: Yes, and my boss told me that I showed up in the newspaper and asked why. And they also were saying, "Oh, we're not happy because you testified; you give out your name to the newspaper."

AT: My boss didn't really tell me. He told somebody else that I wasn't right, what I was doing. So I feel a little bit discriminated because it was my right. I'm fighting for my rights. We were asking for a raise, and they were like, "No, you don't deserve a raise. You already make enough. Your job doesn't deserve—you don't really need to make more money." And sometimes they yell at work because we have to be ready in 45 seconds, and 45 seconds is not really enough. It's really hard, to put the food together and put the fries and put everything in the right way; it's really hard in 45 seconds.

YR: My manager's not happy because I'm on the Fight for \$15. I think that it is something even more personal. At some point, he asked me to cut my hair, even though I was working with my hair like in the past, but after the Fight for \$15, he sent me to cut my hair. August of this year, I took my vacation and it's now October and they haven't paid me my vacation. They used to pay one-week

vacation to some workers. But after I'm involved in the Fight for \$15, I took my vacation and they haven't paid. I think that they're doing that because I'm fighting for \$15.

AT: I haven't had retaliation yet, because I'm new in the campaign. But Yancy's different because she has been involved, and she showed up in the newspapers.

Student: Both of you have mentioned feeling like the corporation doesn't respect you as workers. But I was wondering, how do you feel about the way you are treated by customers? Do you feel you are disrespected by them?

JY: Some customers are nice, some not, but we still have to work. A customer went to the store, and he saw me in the newspaper, and he was saying, "I didn't know you were going to be so strong to show up in the paper saying what you were saying. And I really feel that you deserve not \$15, you deserve \$20, \$21, and more than that." The customer also was saying that McDonald's looked like a hard job, and we responded, "Yes, it is a really hard job." Most of the workers are Latinos working pretty hard in the kitchen.

Yeah, he is a customer, and I've been working for around eight years. And he's saying that he sees how we work hard, and we are really, really strong workers in this country. Some of the customers feel really happy with Fight for \$15.

AT: Like Yancy said, some of them are happy, some are not. People don't really know my life. I have a manager who told me that some customers are not happy because the food takes so long, something like that. There are only three workers in the kitchen, and when someone takes a break, it's only two workers left to take care of everything. They take all the orders and make sure that everything is right; they have to clean the store and make sure that everything's ready for the next day when the store opens again. And three workers is already not enough to do all the work in the store. So it's really hard.

Student: Have the employees been assuaged by having their voices heard and taking part in the Fight for \$15 even though—because of the power that McDonald's has over them to take their hours and the fear for their jobs?

GR: A lot of workers are really scared. And yes, they feel trapped when the manager comes and says, "If you do that, I'm going to cut your hours so you can be terminated." Those people depend on the job, and they don't want to lose their job. They feel trapped. They honestly feel fear. They feel scared. I mean, look, it happens every day in every fast-food restaurant. Some of them understand that at the end of the day, they have no security of work. They can get fired for anything. We know workers are being fired just because they take a piece of bread. If you Fight for \$15, at least you are going to have some support, and you're going to be fighting for something that is right. But in these fast-food corporations, you can get fired

for anything. So a lot of people end up understanding that this fight—you can get fired in the fast-food industry anyway, and they end up saying, "Well, I'm going to fight anyway no matter what they do to me."

Student: If the wages are increased to \$15, it would make sense that employers would fire workers and even hire less people. What are your viewpoints and thoughts on that?

OS: Sure. You know, there're a lot of reports by economists on what happens when you raise the wage, and in almost all of the cities where the wages have already been raised, it's actually found that there's been job growth. So I think it's a misconception that if you raise wages, then companies are going to automatically have to fire workers. I think actually the opposite is happening in a lot of cities.

Sharryn Kasmir: Los Angeles is one of the places where it's been looked at closely. What you see is that people who earn at the bottom of the wage tier spend their money in their communities on goods and services. So it tends to have a positive impact on the local economy in that way, whereas when people at the upper end of the wealth spectrum get more money, it doesn't go back into the communities. You don't see that trickle-down effect that you might expect. It's really more a trickle-up effect from the lowest earners.

GR: We also proved in other countries where they organize, in some countries the workers make \$21 an hour, that there are more workers in the store, they're working more. For example, in Denmark, the workers are unionized. Workers start at \$21 an hour, and they get benefits, and the cost of meal is only 70 cents more than the U.S. We also have proof from other cities here in the U.S. Workers basically already making \$15 an hour and the productivity increases. The company doesn't really stop making more, and they have happier workers.

OS: Also there are a lot of small businesses who agree that raising wages is good because it's good for their business. They say that when you pay a fair wage, there is less employee turnover, which actually saves that company money in the long run. It also increases the morale of the workers. And when people in the community know that you're treating your workers well, people are going to come in and shop there.

SK: I want to ask the students, does anybody work in fast food? Does anybody work for minimum wage? Those of you working for minimum wage, what would it mean to you to earn \$15 an hour?

Student: Probably pay off my student loans.

Student: It would mean a lot mainly because—not just paying off like student loans and things like that, but going to school is my way of helping my family. So if I can push myself to get into the Fight for \$15, it would mean so much for me to help support my family, as well, and my son. I would be able to help out my family,

as well, since my parents also work very—not exactly minimum wage, but very, very close to minimum wage. And it would at least help—definitely me help—help out at least with them, help out myself with paying the gas and food, paying for, again, student loan, which is always the big one.

Student: I also think that it's definitely an economic and a race issue. And I think by raising the minimum wage you're leveling out a playing field that's inherently unequal.

OS: Yeah, that's an important point. I think that the Fight for \$15 movement has been very interested in issues of race, as well. I think sometimes that different social movements are focused on one issue. What's great about the Fight for \$15 and what's important for any movement that we're a part of is the intersection of a different issues of race and class and gender and all the factors that create inequalities.

GR: Like I was saying, the Fight for \$15 is not only for fast-food workers. We're also including the immigrant communities in this fight, so we all together can push for different issues. We're also in partnership with Black Lives Matter to try to find a solution to the problems in the communities. This movement isn't just about fast-food workers, it's people trying to get out of poverty. Right now, this is about changing every single problem and getting better wages for every low-wage worker in the U.S. And we know we can do it, and the only way to do it is with everybody being out there supporting and striking and marching.

Sharryn Kasmir is a Professor of Anthropology at Hofstra University.

*REGIONAL LABOR REVIEW, vol. 18, no.2 (Spring/Summer 2016).
© 2016 Center for the Study of Labor and Democracy, Hofstra University*