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Fight for $15: Good Wins, but Where did the Focus on Organizing Go?

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Hit "pause" for a moment on the latest Trump outrage and think back to the political landscape in the aftermath of the Wall Street–induced train wreck of nine years ago. That period, too, was daunting for unions.

The Obama administration bailed out the financiers while businesses fired 8.7 million workers, banks foreclosed on more than 14 million homeowners, and unions lost 1 million members (BCS Alliance 2011; Center on Budget and Policy Priorities 2017; Statistic Brain 2016; U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics 2015).[1] Labor law reform died in spite of Democratic congressional supermajorities. The Affordable Care Act, stripped of universal coverage and the public option, barely limped across the finish line only to become a permanent hyperpartisan flash point. Democrats lost control of the political narrative and got crushed in the November 2010 elections. One in every six American workers was seeking work, Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker launched his statewide union-busting plan, and an ascendant Tea Party–driven national discourse—setting the stage for today's mess—placed blame for the economic crisis not on corporate greed but on the federal government, immigrants, and unions.

Amid this deepening crisis, in early 2011 the leadership of the Service Employees International Union, the union I worked for at the time, experienced an organizational epiphany. To stop the slide into irrelevancy, SEIU swung the union's resources into a massive, US$60 million grassroots campaign in seventeen cities around the country, deploying 1,500 organizers to reclaim the high ground in the economic debate and to organize workers into unions on a massive scale.[2]

In launching the Fight for a Fair Economy (FFE), SEIU leaders declared that it wasn't sufficient for SEIU and other unions to take on corporations one bargaining or political fight at a time. A much broader fightback for jobs and against cuts was required. Unions had to organize new workers into their ranks, not shop-by-shop but on a massive scale. SEIU leaders talked about "the 7 percent problem," referring to the percentage of private-sector American workers who belonged to unions. What was needed was a return to the 1930s industrial organizing, in which workers across employers organized together. "It won't be enough to try harder," read one SEIU briefing. "What we need is game-changers."

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The FFE had two main thrusts: First, through major worker mobilizations and actions, change the national public debate about what was wrong with the economy, expose corporate greed, and fight for better working conditions. And second, launch large-scale private-sector organizing campaigns to “move the union density dial” and rebuild durable union power.

Beginning with massive neighborhood canvasses that fed into protests outside banks and inside shareholders meetings, FFE blossomed in cities through the United States in early 2011. Low wage retail, fast food, airport, health care, child care, and other workers merged into this burgeoning, electrifying street movement. In Seattle, FFE led to the Sea-Tac Airport workers organizing campaign (where I served as campaign director). In New York and other cities, FFE galvanized fast-food workers around the call for “$15 and a union,” launching what became the national Fight for $15 campaign.

Seven years later, we can say with confidence that the first goal of FFE has been accomplished, Trump notwithstanding. The mass protests and heroism of ordinary workers—marching, relating their stories to the media, walking out of work, and committing civil disobedience at corporate shareholder meetings—forced the political establishment to address the crisis. President Obama was moved to declare that income inequality was “the defining challenge of our time.” Pundits noted with alarm that at the largest U.S. corporations, chief executive pay had reached 354 times the average worker wage, an eightfold increase over thirty years (Kaplan 2013; “S&P 500 CEOs Make 354 Times More than Their Average Workers: AFL-CIO” 2013). Indeed, a share of the momentum behind Bernie Sanders’s insurgent presidential bid can be attributed to the wage battles sparked by Fight for $15.

Seven years on as well, we can celebrate that more than 17 million low-wage workers in the United States have won pay increases, and 10 million of those will see their hourly pay rise to US$15 in the next few years.[3]

All good. But not nearly enough.

There’s another figure that matters: in the years since SEIU leaders declared a dire emergency and launched the FFE, private-sector union density has continued to decline. The “7 percent problem” that SEIU leaders talked about with such urgency in the winter of 2011 had become, by 2016, a 6.4 percent problem.[4]

What began as a bold vision to organize private-sector workers and rebuild worker power has tapered for the most part into a tremendously exciting—yet limiting—campaign around wages, as the #FightFor15 moniker suggests. SEIU’s FFE certainly changed the national discourse about low pay but has not reversed the overall downward slide of unions.

In his essay “Assessing the Fight for Fifteen Movement from Chicago,” Steven Ashby makes important points about the historic achievements of this fight. As he properly notes, the successes ought to be measured not just by the tangible economic gains but also by recognizing the burst of confidence as workers engaged in collective struggle, the indispensability of workers’ voices centered in the campaign, and the growing intersectionality of the Fight for $15 with #BlackLivesMatter, Moral Mondays, and other social movements.

Unfortunately, though, like too many observers and participants in the Fight for $15 movement, Ashby fails to measure the movement by the goal it set for itself in 2011: to organize workers on an industrial basis into durable worker organizations and to build working-class power.

This historic task is, obviously, still a work in progress. We should not expect to turn around in such a short time a labor movement that for decades has been led largely by leaders who neglected organizing, failed to adequately challenge corporate power, protected their own dues-paying members at the expense of broader class interests, and remained stubbornly tethered to a political duopoly that has bestowed on us outsourced and exported jobs, stagnant wages, precarious employment schemes, terminated pension plans, rising health care costs, and an eviscerated social safety net.

Yet the enormity of this challenge doesn't absolve us from holding ourselves accountable and facing up to hard questions. Yes, we should celebrate wins. But we are obliged to keep a focus on the original mandate to build durable worker power, and to assess our work with a critical eye. Too many good people in the movement seem to be having a hard time doing that. A movement that fails to embrace critical analysis and reflection won't last long in today's world.

As painful as they may be to Ashby, the critiques he so dislikes are exactly the medicine we need as a movement. He assails those who criticize Fight for $15 for relying too often on public relations and not enough on building grassroots power. But you can love the Fight for $15, recognize its historic importance, and still point out its serious flaws.

I have been on picket lines of fast-food workers who have shut down their store. And I have been on picket lines with one or two workers and thirty union staff, circling around a fast-food restaurant only as long as the TV cameras were present. When Jane McAlevey calls out the latter as "pretend power," she is not, as Ashby asserts, discounting the courage and determination of individual workers who walk off the job. Rather, McAlevey is pointing out the obvious—a strike is not a photo op; it is the collective withdrawal of labor power by workers to force an economic or political concession.

At times, there may be tactically sound reasons for picketing a store with union staff and allies, but to conflate that with expressions of real worker power is intellectually misleading and won't help us figure out what it's going to take to challenge and beat corporate power in the twenty-first century.

The Fight for $15 has relied on a militant minority to drive the movement, and Ashby argues that's similar to other leading labor struggles in history. But in drawing an analogy between the Fight for $15 and the historic 1937 Flint autoworker sit-down strike, he misses the fundamental distinction between the two campaigns and, in doing so, elides the central question of power. He recounts how the Flint strike succeeded when a militant minority of workers seized a particular factory in the sprawling General Motors (GM) operation that was pivotal to the production of cars. By shutting down production, and therefore halting GM's revenue, the workers gained leverage.

The fast-food workers, by comparison, haven't attempted to choke off the income of corporate masters. By walking out for an hour, or a day, they are not expecting to cause significant economic harm—to do so would require hundreds of thousands of fast-food workers striking around the country. Rather, the individual store or city walkouts are political actions intended over time to build worker confidence, mobilize public opinion, and wear down the adversary.

Critics are right to point out that while these actions are valuable elements of an overall strategy, they will not be nearly enough to push a company like McDonald's to the bargaining table. Workers and allies will need to do a lot more, on top of walkouts, to force the concessions that we need.

Along with Ashby, I'm excited that a movement that began with two hundred New York City fast-food workers in November 2012 has grown tremendously, with dozens of walkouts, about one thousand civil disobedience arrests, two thousand workers attending the 2016 Fight for $15 national convention, and perhaps upward of sixty thousand workers taking some sort of collective action. Great, inspiring progress to be sure, but engaging just a small fraction of the 3.8 million fast-food workers in the United States today.[5]

The question for Fight for $15—yet unanswered—is how to harness the energy of the walkouts to stoke a sustained movement of hundreds of thousands if not millions of workers who collectively can inflict real economic pain on the corporate masters.

Indeed, the task in front of fast-food workers and allies today is to do exactly what the Flint autoworkers did eighty years ago, though on a much grander scale: identify the weak points in the industry's operating scheme and figure out how to exploit these vulnerabilities through collective, sustained action. In fast food, this means understanding the whole operation—from production to distribution to sales, marketing, branding, shareholder relations, franchise models, international expansion plans, government regulation, whatever—and mapping out all of the corporate weak points along with the allies we have globally to organize a powerful worker-led movement.

Ashby points to an important analogue—the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), whose members have been engaged in a running battle against the school district's management, the city's autocratic mayor, and a bevy of financiers and neoliberals bent on destroying public education. The union members developed a strategy based on an analysis of power in the school system. They mapped out their adversaries and allies, and engaged in deep organizing: worksite by worksite, to build grassroots worker leadership, and also in the community with parents and community activists who shared a stake in protecting public education. Notably, the CTU success story is grounded in a worksite leadership model and authentic engagement of members through strong internal democratic processes. This is the sort of deep, systematic, worker-centered organizing that the labor movement must do much more of in the Fight for $15 and in other industrial organizing.

Finally, there is the matter of setting appropriate expectations. There's no question that the pay raises workers are winning through Fight for $15 are relieving soul-crushing poverty while building worker confidence in struggle. But the harsh truth is that US$15 won't solve our economic woes. It's not even a living wage in many urban areas, and it represents a pittance of what capital has stolen from the working class in recent years. We must build a movement that aims higher.

If we could somehow win an immediate US$15 minimum wage in this country, it would redistribute more than a trillion dollars of wealth to low-wage earners. That's a lot of money! But it would only represent a small fraction of the US$6.6 trillion growth in wealth inequality between the richest Americans and the rest of us that happened in the United States in just the twenty-four months following the official end of the Great Recession in 2009 (Pew Research Center 2013).

Airport baggage handler Alex Hoopes was one of the leaders of the historic Sea-Tac Airport campaign, the first successful US$15 ballot initiative in the country. After we won the 2013 ballot initiative and fended off legal challenges, Hoopes saw his hourly pay rise from US$9.50 to more than US$16—immediately, with no phase in. That's great. But back in 2005, Hoopes had been working as a baggage handler for Alaska Airlines—with a union contract, benefits, and wages that would be equivalent to US$27 an hour today. That's when the airline fired Hoopes and his 471 coworkers, broke their union, and replaced them with minimum wage contract workers. Today, as a result of the campaign, Hoopes and most of the low-wage Sea-Tac Airport workers have won back union rights. But even after our recent win, Hoopes is paid at least US$23,000 per year less than what he would be making had Alaska Airlines not broken the union and contracted out work in 2005.[6]

This corporate theft has invaded every sector of our economy.

So the wage fights are strategically vital, but we must recognize that they are not nearly enough to turn the tide of corporate greed that has produced vast inequality in all facets of American life—jobs, housing, health, educational opportunity, criminal justice, and environment.

The labor movement—the collective power of workers—must claim a much higher ambition than lessening the level of economic inequality in society. The Fight for $15 is transformational as long as it's understood not as an end goal but rather as an on-ramp to a much greater struggle and a powerful vision of a just society.

That's why Fight for $15's growing work with other social movements, here and outside the United States, are important. They reflect an understanding that building power for workers will take more than walkouts and media-staged events. And they demonstrate an understanding that the economic fight in fast food is inextricably bound up with issues of race, gender and gender identity, immigration, trade, and climate justice.

We should applaud and support the experimentation in movement-building that is taking place in these intersecting arenas. In particular, we should back new forms of union organization in the gig and informal economies, in precarious and part-time work, as well as those in more traditional industries. Taxi operators and Uber drivers have organized strikes to demand better pay and rights and to defend social rights. Fast-food workers in New York City are beginning to experiment with organizational models that don't look like traditional collective bargaining but have the potential to build regional worker power. Undocumented immigrant day laborers, housekeepers, and caregivers have united with immigrant rights groups to form worker centers in dozens of cities around the country, leveraging wage standards and basic rights through collective action. Ashby asserts—without substantiation—that worker centers are "not unions," but in fact these forms of worker organization are quintessentially unions: they are organizations of workers uniting to fight for the things that they need.

Casting aside narrow thinking and embracing creativity are essential to our work of building a new labor movement, in fast food and in other industries. As we march, support, stand up, and sit down with low-wage workers, we must continue to ask the tough questions, celebrate but not settle for wage victories alone, and maintain a laser focus on the worker power-building goal that was so clearly articulated in 2011.

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Notes

1. Hirsh and Macpherson, "Union Membership and Coverage Database from the CPS (Union Stats.com)."
2. Service Employees International Union, "The Fight for a Fair Economy Review" (report published internally, January 2013).
3. See http://www.nelp.org/publication/fight-for-15-impact-report-raises-for-17-million-workers-10-million-going-to-15/.
4. See https://www.bls.gov/news.release/union2.nr0.htm.
5. See https://www.statista.com/statistics/196630/number-of-employees-in-us-fast-food-restaurants-since-2002/.
6. See chapter 2 of my book, *Beyond $15: Immigrant Workers, Faith Activists, and the Revival of the Labor Movement*, Beacon Press, 2017.

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