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Fast-food workers protest at McDonald's, other restaurants

Employees in Chicago, other cities demand higher wages

By Corilyn Shropshire

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Undeterred by rain and temperatures in the 40s, dozens of protesters gathered Thursday outside Chicago's Rock 'n' Roll McDonald's, joining others around the world calling for higher wages.

A mariachi band kicked off the early morning demonstration by community activists and fast-food workers, some of whom walked off their jobs for the day. Rain poncho-clad demonstrators demanding \$15-an-hour pay circled the McDonald's with signs and chanted in Spanish, "What do we want? \$15! When do we want it? Now!" and "McDonald's, we are here."

Protesters targeted McDonald's, Burger King, Wendy's and other fast-food restaurants Thursday in 150 U.S. cities, including Boston, New York, Philadelphia and Miami, organizers said. The movement began as a walkout in New York in 2012 before spreading across the country last year.

Chicago protesters walked up and down outside the Rock 'n' Roll McDonald's all day, accompanied by musicians and passers-by. Some vehicles honked in support as they drove past the tourist attraction at 600 N. Clark St.

The restaurant remained open during the protest. Demonstrators were asked by security personnel to remain on the sidewalk outside the restaurant's Ontario Street entrance.

"McDonald's respects our employees' right to voice their opinions and to protest lawfully and peacefully," the Oak Brook-based company said in a statement. "If employees participate in these activities, they are welcomed back and scheduled to work their regular shifts."

"We respect the right of employees to choose whether or not they want to unionize," the statement said.

Delores Leonard, of the Bronzeville neighborhood, said she joined the demonstration because the \$8.25 an hour she earns as a cashier at a South Side McDonald's doesn't cover half of her rent and utility bills. The mother of two daughters said she relies on food stamps, Medicaid and other government assistance to make ends meet.

"People that prepare the food are the heart and soul of the services," she said. "It's absurd for \$8.25. It's just not enough, and if they were in our shoes, they would understand."

Workers and activists, bankrolled largely by the Service Employees International Union, have staged five other one-day strikes. In addition to \$15 per hour, workers say they want to be able to form a union — without retaliation — that would bargain over benefits and wages on their behalf. Fast-food workers in Chicago make about \$8.25 per hour, the state's minimum wage. Many are part-time workers without benefits and do not have a set schedule.

Fast-food workers are a hard group to organize, as most of them are employed by individual franchisees. A union would have to launch a campaign with every employer and gain the support of the majority of the workers at every location.

For now, the Workers Organizing Committee of Chicago is educating workers on labor laws and asking them to voluntarily join the group, which is registered as a union. The workers do not pay dues but are asked to attend meetings and participate in events.

Ninety-two percent of fast-food workers in the Chicago area said they have experienced at least one form of "wage theft," according to a poll done on behalf of the movement. Wage theft includes having to work off the clock or being denied breaks during long shifts.

The libertarian Cato Institute said paying fast-food workers \$15 an hour could lead companies to cut jobs and boost menu prices. The right-leaning Employment Policies Institute said nearly 500,000 workers nationwide could lose their jobs.

President Barack Obama has pushed Congress to raise the federal minimum wage to \$10.10 per hour from the current \$7.25, a move fought by Republicans in Congress.

Workers outside the U.S. also protested, including in Argentina, Belgium, Brazil, Germany, India, Japan, Malawi, Morocco, New Zealand, Panama and the United Kingdom. In all, organizers say 34 countries participated.