

The Flint Voice

March 1980

An Independent, Alternative Newspaper

FREE

The Plight of the Minimum Wage Workers

Life at \$3.10 an hour

By Alan Hirvela

Some call it menial labor. Others call it minimum wage work. Those who do it often call it "shit work."

The real word for it, though, is exploitation.

What are we talking about? We're talking about low wage workers: cooks and counter people at McDonalds or Burger King; waitresses at Walli's or Sambo's; self-serve gas station attendants; cashiers at Sunshine stores or Seven-Elevens or Stop & Go's; or any of a host of other jobs in our society.

In other words, the non-unionized workers in this country who, because they have no protection from employers who see no need to consider their interests, work for minimum wage salaries, are there on holidays, without benefits and usually without respect.

They're the people who clean up after us or who are always there when we need coffee or gasoline or bread or party supplies late at night; the people who perform vital or necessary services for us but who go unrewarded for their work.

Quite often they're young people: high school students working nights or weekends in their first job, or college students trying to earn enough money for tuition or books or gas to get to and from school. They're also the people lacking so-called higher education who find themselves unwanted in other fields of employment while waiting to get hired in at Buick or AC. Or they're women—many with children—trying to make ends meet.

Too often they're people who are in desperate need of a job and who will remain, for one reason or another, stuck in the frustrating, unrewarding realm of low wage employment.

More than anything else they're exploited workers—a vast pool of laborers forced to drift about in a cold sea of indifference and insensitivity on the part of employers who know they can always replace them and who make that

clear to the employees.

Exploited is the only way to describe these workers. They receive pay that is a mockery in the current domain of high prices and continually rising costs; they work long and often disjointed hours that frequently wreak havoc on the other areas of their lives; and when they're sick or unable to attend work for valid personal reasons, they not only receive no pay but all too often are in jeopardy of losing their jobs.

And all of this happens because they're not unionized; because they have no representation that can assure them of the protection that other workers have. They're part of the nearly 80% of this country's workers who don't belong to unions and who are subject, as a result, to whatever whims and narrow self interests their employers or companies might have.

Is it any wonder, then, that so many of these workers say that they do "shit work?"

That expression itself is interesting because it so often translates into a personal identity for the workers. People doing this kind of work frequently end up seeing themselves in the same way: with no status or material (buying) power because their wages are so low, and with no rights or sense of control over their fate because they're told so often that they're unskilled, uneducated, and replaceable.

The truth is, however, that these workers are valuable. There isn't a day that goes by when each of us doesn't utilize the services of at least one of these people. Maybe it's an Egg McMuffin at McDonalds before work; maybe it's a pack of cigarettes at 1:00 in the morning on the way home from the shop; or any of a thousand things that we do or need which requires the labor of these people.

As it's constructed today, American society is as dependent on these workers as it is on any others, and yet they receive such a small part of what they deserve for the necessary role they play. Try to imagine what it would be like if for some reason all of America's



Photo by Garrison Crenshaw

low wage workers didn't report for work one day. We'd have total chaos throughout the country. Where would we go, for example, if we were almost out of gas at midnight and there wasn't an all night self serve station or a Sunshine Store open? What would the thousands of offices around the country be like if the secretaries weren't there?

This country runs through the labor of these workers, and it's time they were paid and treated accordingly.

How is this going to come about, though? Can we expect employers around the nation to suddenly decide that these workers should, indeed, be paid as much as workers with similar educational backgrounds and experience in other fields receive?

The answer, obviously, is no. If low wage workers are to achieve the material and non-material rewards they deserve for their labor, it will have to come about through organization, through joining together in collective bargaining units and other forms of representation for entire groups of workers. And that can't happen until the self-concept of low wage workers changes.

What needs to be seen is that low wage workers *do* have the power to control and decide their own fate. And their view of themselves in relation to their work and their role in this society must come from themselves and their own feelings about their work, rather than from employers whose best inter-

ests are served by creating and maintaining the impression that these workers are worthless and vulnerable.

As has been said so often in the past, there's strength in numbers. There's power in unity, and if any group has cause for unity, it's low wage workers. And that unity and strength can come from the things that invisibly tie all low wage workers together: unfair pay, unjust and unregulated hours or scheduling, lack of proper benefits, and an absence of respect from employers. Whatever their field of employment, these conditions exist for low wage workers in every part of the country.

Collectively, low wage workers are a powerful majority, rather than a divided, isolate minority continually taught to view themselves as powerless. And it's time for these workers who so often are encouraged or intimidated into staying apart to come together so as to create fair, equitable pay and benefits, and to develop proper working conditions.

It can, and will, be done.

INSIDE:

First Burger King in country is unionized in Detroit — Page 10

Secretaries organize for better wages, treatment — Page 11

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