

Employees at McDonald's and KFC lead growing US protests over low pay, finds Edward Helmore

McDonald's in New York's Times Square. The fast-food store heaves with New Yorkers and tourists. The staff, remarkably unstressed, offer only accommodating smiles. But behind the scenes the atmosphere is anything but relaxed.

McDonald's, along with dozens of fast-food and retail chains, is being rocked by unprecedented workforce and consumer-led protests over wages and conditions.

Since last year, when Walmart faced the first co-ordinated strikes in its history, protests have been spreading through America's low-wage workforce. Earlier this month thousands of fast-food workers in cities including New York, Chicago and Detroit took to the streets, many wearing "Fight for 15" T-shirts - a reference to the popular call for a \$15 hourly wage, almost double the current minimum. With more protests planned, America's most marginalised, vulnerable and exploited workforce is on the march.

"We're frustrated and we're angry," says Alex Mack, 33, a worker at Wendy's in Chicago. "I make \$8.25 an hour and it's impossible to live on. I'm a father, a husband. I'm always robbing Peter to pay Paul, shorting one bill to pay another." But Mack is optimistic that the strike action will be successful. "If we stick together, it's not impossible."

The one-day protests struck not only McDonald's, Wendy's and KFC but more expensive retail stores such as Nike, Macy's and Victoria's Secret. Last month McDonald's made headlines after it published a guide budget for employees living on the minimum wage - a gesture that backfired after the firm's own calculations showed survival on what it paid was only possible with a second job or if you live without a food budget or heating.

"The McDonald's wage - like any minimum wage - is basically a starvation wage," says John Mason, a professor of politics at William Paterson University in New Jersey. "It effectively places you at 30% below the official poverty budget."

"The five largest employers in the US, including Walmart and McDonald's, all pay minimum wage, or close to it," says Mason. "They only succeed in this strategy because they're massively subsidised by the government through food stamps and Medicare."

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Angus knew just what Big Lou had been obliged to put up with of her trials with those various unsuitable men; of her struggle to make something of her life; of everything she had endured. She never, or rarely, complained, and so to see her now in this state of distress was a real cause for concern. Of course he had known from the beginning that Robbie was, as Matthew had so succinctly put it, 'bad news'. It was not as if Robbie were violent or drunken, or suffered from any of the other obvious defects to which the male was heir; it was not that. It was more a question of his being a man with a cause, and the cause in question being so... well, one would really have to say odd.

'Oh, Lou,' said Angus. 'Tell me. Tell me what's wrong.'

He reached out over the bar and laid his hand over hers. It was a gentle gesture; a gesture of fellow-feeling that was immediately appreciated. She looked at him.

'Robbie?' he asked. 'He's making you unhappy? Is that it?' Of course he was; what else could it be?

Big Lou bit her lip. 'I'm very fond of him, Angus. You ken that. Very fond.'

'Of course you are, Lou. And I'm sure he's fond of you.' But not as fond of you, he thought, as he is of Charles Edward Stuart and James VII and all that crowd.

Big Lou nodded. 'I think he is. He tells me he is. But...'

'But what, Lou?' He hesitated. 'Is it something to do with his Jacobitism? Is that the problem?' He knew that it was; of course it was. Robbie had a screw missing, as Matthew again had put it.

Big Lou confirmed that it was. 'I understand what it means to him,' she said. 'And I've tried to enter into the spirit of it. But now I think that they're taking it too far. It's all very well having an interest in history, but when you can't seem to tell the difference between reality and fantasy...' She paused. 'You know that they've been planning a visit from their pretender? Some Belgian who claims to be the successor of Bonnie Prince Charlie.'