

Fast-food workers say restaurants fail to pay what they're owed

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Fast-food workers and their supporters in Tampa, Fla., on Dec. 5, 2013. The Tampa rally was part of a 100-city strike organized across the U.S. seeking to promote a living wage for food service jobs. Daniel Wallace/Tampa Bay Times/MCT

Workers say some companies are cheating them. They say bosses are not paying them all the money they are owed. People who support the workers call it "wage theft."

Many of those workers are in the fast-food business. They are going to court over wage theft in three states. Employers have also paid large amounts of money to settle such cases.

Workers protested Thursday in front of three McDonald's and Burger King restaurants in Kansas City, Missouri. Some of their signs said "wage theft" and "stolen wages." The protest was organized by a group called StandUpKC. Fast-food workers, religious leaders and lawyers were there. So were union members. Unions help workers. They fight to get them better pay and rights.

McDonald's and Burger King said wage theft is against company rules. They say that they are looking into the complaints.

When Wage Theft Happens

Burger King said Thursday that the company "respects the rights of all workers." The company said most of its restaurants are owned by "franchisees." These franchisees do not work for Burger King. They own their own Burger King restaurants. They pay Burger King to open their own restaurant, called a franchise. Burger King said it does not make decisions for the franchisees.

McDonald's has said that it takes all complaints seriously.

There were many wage theft protests in the country in March. Meanwhile, President Obama and others in Washington want to increase the **minimum wage**. The minimum wage is the lowest amount an employer is allowed to pay a worker.

Employers can take wages in many ways, the workers said.

They may say that a worker did fewer hours of work than is true. This is often done to avoid paying overtime hours. Employers often have to pay workers more if they work extra hours in a week.

They may also charge workers for uniforms. Or they can make the workers pay for other things.

A restaurant can also incorrectly say a worker is not supposed to get overtime. Or a boss may make a worker work for no pay. This is called "off-clock work."

Workers Going To Court

More than 1,000 fast-food workers were asked questions recently. Nine in 10 said they were hurt by wage theft.

Supporters of the workers said the problems are everywhere. Lawyers are trying to get money back from McDonald's and some of its franchisees in California, Michigan and New York. Workers say they were forced to work extra hours for no money. They also say they had to pay too much for uniforms.

One McDonald's in New York paid \$500,000 back to its workers. The McDonald's workers said the restaurant owner did not pay them for the costs of cleaning their uniforms.

In another case, 23 Domino's pizza restaurants in New York paid \$448,000 back to workers. The workers claimed they were paid less than the minimum wage. A Domino's spokesman said it was up to the franchisees. Those franchisees are "independent business owners," the spokesman said. Domino's says it can't control how they treat their workers.

Supporters of workers say problems at restaurants are hard to stop. The reason is that the U.S. Department of Labor doesn't have enough money or people to

look into all the problems. The Labor Department is in charge of making sure workers are protected by the law.

“There just aren’t enough people to enforce the laws,” said Catherine Ruckelshaus. She is an employment lawyer. Workers have to tell their stories to get protection, she said. “And that’s really hard.”

Quiz

- 1 Which sentence from the article BEST shows how widespread wage theft is?
- (A) Nine in 10 said they were hurt by wage theft.
 - (B) More than 1,000 fast-food workers were asked questions recently.
 - (C) The McDonald's workers said the restaurant owner did not pay them for the costs of cleaning their uniforms.
 - (D) Supporters of the workers said the problems are everywhere.
- 2 Select the paragraph from the introduction [paragraphs 1-4] that describes the basic problem for fast-food workers.
- 3 Read the introductory paragraph of the article.

Workers say some companies are cheating them. They say bosses are not paying them all the money they are owed. People who support the workers call it "wage theft."

Which selection from the paragraph gives a hint to the meaning of the word "wage"?

- (A) some companies
 - (B) support the workers
 - (C) cheating them
 - (D) paying them
- 4 Read the sentence from the article.
- They say that they are looking into the complaints.*

Which sentence from the article shows one of the workers' "complaints"?

- (A) McDonald's has said that it takes all complaints seriously.
- (B) These franchisees do not work for Burger King.
- (C) Meanwhile, President Obama and others in Washington want to increase the minimum wage.
- (D) They may say that a worker did fewer hours of work than is true.