ON SCHEDULE FOR CHANGE

Retail Workers Push for Steady Hours

BY JENYA CASSIDY

In the continuing economic downturn, retail is one of the few areas where we are likely to see job growth now and into the future. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the number of retail jobs is projected to increase another 16.6 percent by the year 2020. And the largest US company — Walmart — sets the standard for the retail sector. Workers organizing to change Walmart say this won’t be good news for those trying to raise families unless there is a major shift in the way the company treats its employees. Retail workers struggle with low pay and insufficient benefits, but it is the erratic scheduling that makes life difficult for those with family responsibilities.

“One of the hardest things about working at Walmart, is that our schedules change all the time,” said Victoria Nogueda, who has worked at its store in Fremont, California, for four years. “One week you may work from 7 am to 2 pm, and the next week they will put you on from 3 pm to 11 pm. There is no way to plan your life. Unstable schedules make this a very hard job for workers with families.” This is typical of the retail field according to a recent report, “Discounted Jobs: How Retailers Sell Workers Short,” by the New York-based Retail Action Project (RAP). Only 17 percent of retail workers surveyed have a set schedule, with the majority facing unpredictable hours, on-call shifts, call-in pay violations, penalties for scheduling requests, and benefits avoidance through “legal misclassification.”

As Nogueda points out, many who work in retail seek to improve their economic situations by going to school or working a second job. But the erratic schedules make this impossible. “It is hard when you don’t know what your schedule is going to be. You don’t have the opportunity to work another job, take care of your family or personal life, make any commitments to anyone else, take a class, or grow as a person,” she said.

The campaign, “Just Hours New York,” has already raised awareness nationwide through online petitions and a social media campaign. According to Nogueda, erratic scheduling inspired her and coworkers to join OUR Walmart, a national worker-led organization focused on improving Walmart jobs. “This is partly why we got together to organize. People want stable schedules. We would feel more respected if these needs were being met,” she said.

Organizing around the issue of schedules can be successful. In 2012, workers at Macy’s and Bloomingdales in New York, members of Retail Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) Local 1-S and Local 3, won the right to have more control over scheduling by seniority in their contract. Workers will be able to choose one weekend off a month and their late-night shifts. This is rare in retail where only about 5% of the workforce is unionized.

Nogueda hopes that continued organizing of Walmart workers and other retail workers will make a difference for them as well. “We are pushing for change — we want to speak out about our schedules and other issues without retaliation. We don’t hate our employer — we want to make Walmart better so we can do better.”

For more information about these campaigns, visit the websites of OUR Walmart, http://forrespect.org/, and the Retail Action Project (RAP), http://retailactionproject.org/.

Photo: Courtesy of OUR Walmart.

OUR Walmart member Semetra Lee and family joined coworkers and community members at a Black Friday Walmart action in Richmond, California. This Thanksgiving and Black Friday, Walmart Associates held strikes and actions in protest of the company’s unfair treatment of workers.
Food Chain Workers Need To Be Nourished

BY STEFANIE KALMIN

The luxury of going out to dinner…
o no shopping, no cooking, no

clean up. Just good food brought to the
table, no dishes to wash. Diners should

enjoy their meals. But if the Food Chain
Workers Alliance has its way, patrons will
go home and ponder that their food
comes courtesy of many people who can’t afford to feed their own families,
take sick days, or pay for childcare. “Soup
to nuts,” this includes many workers
along the food chain — those who
plant, harvest, process, pack, transport,
prepare, serve, and sell food. They are
some of the most exploited and poorest
employees in the world.

The Alliance, a coalition of worker-
based organizations, strives to improve
wages and working conditions for the
more than 20 million people who work in
the food system in the US alone. Its
website (http://foodchainworkers.org)
defines a group that “works together
to build a more sustainable food system
that respects workers’ rights, based on
the principles of social, environmental
and racial justice, in which everyone has
access to healthy and affordable food.”

In 2009, the Alliance formally
coalesced thanks to the growing
national interest in food and food
systems, topics made popular by writ-
ers such as Michael Pollan (Omnivore’s
Dilemma) and Eric Schlosser (Fast Food
Nation). The movement jelled when The
Restaurant Opportunities Centers United
(ROC United) convened a meeting at the
2008 Labor Notes Conference to share
ideas. Participating organizations recog-
nized that combining their campaign
experience, membership, and places on
the food chain could lead to more
dramatic changes for workers. Those
diverse early groups included the Center
for New Community, the Coalition of
Immokalee Workers, el Comite de
Apoyo a los Trabajadores Agrícolas, the
International Rights Forum, and the
Northwest Arkansas Workers’ Justice
Center, soon to be joined by Just Harvest
USA, the Restaurant Opportunities Center
of New York, and the United Food and
Commercial Workers Local 1500.

Today, the Alliance has 17 member
organizations and a presence across the
country and on Capitol Hill. One direction
it has chosen to pursue, by partnering
with Family Values@Work and the
National Partnership for Women and
Families, is better paid family leave and
sick days, according to Alliance Director
Joann Lo. “A food handler coming to
work sick has consequences for workers
and consumers alike,” says Lo. “Yet,
many employees are afraid to take any
sick day, to care for themselves or a sick
family member, for fear of losing their
job. We found that four of five workers
don’t have paid sick days — or don’t
know if they have them, so the problem
is educational as well.”

The Alliance is taking every opportunity
to encourage a letter writing campaign
to congressional representatives, asking

them to support the Healthy Families Act,
sponsored by Congress Member Rosa
DeLauro (D-CT) and Senator Tom Harkin
(D-IA). The Act, which would set a national
sick days standard, is badly needed by
food workers, almost 90 percent of
whom don’t have a single paid sick day
to recover from common, short-term
illnesses, and two-thirds of whom report
cooking, preparing, and serving food
while sick, according to ROC United.
Not having sick days puts the greatest
strain on those with the least amount of
resources. According to the Bureau of
Labor Statistics, the food system has 7
of the 10 worst-paying jobs in the US.

In October, the Alliance held a
congressional briefing in Washington,
DC, sponsored by Congress Member
DeLauro. Its content was based on the
Alliance study, “The Hands That Feed
Us: Challenges and Opportunities for
Workers along the Food Chain.” With
the assistance of ROC United and the
DataCenter, among others, the study
examined “wages and working
conditions across the food system,
advancement opportunities for workers,
and potential opportunities for consumers

For our bargaining resources, visit www.learnworkfamily.org
NEW STUDY

- Mothers who were overly stressed during pregnancy are more likely to have kids who will be bullied at school shows new research from the University of Warwick, England, reported in the Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry. According to Professor Dieter Wolke, “When we are exposed to stress, large quantities of neurohormones are released into the bloodstream and in a pregnant woman this can change the developing fetus’ own stress response system.” The more a child reacts when teased, the greater the likelihood of being bullied. Prenatal stress factors named as family problems include financial difficulty, alcohol/drug abuse, and maternal mental health. http://www.medicalnewstoday.com/releases/252840.php

GOOD NEWS

- Paid sick leave is a smart investment, according to the Institute for Women’s Policy Research. In San Francisco, where employers have been required to offer paid leave since 2007, surveys show workers’ lives improved, businesses succeeded, and two-thirds of employers support the city’s sick-days ordinance. Fears that the law would impede job growth were never realized. In fact, during the last five years, employment in SF grew twice as fast as in neighboring counties that had no sick leave policy. http://www.epi.org/publication/paid-sick-leave-wise-investment/

FASCINATING FACTS

- There has been little research done on the macro-econmic effect of the surge in the number women who have entered the workforce in the past 40 years, reports The Economist, but one researcher figures that America’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is now about 25 percent higher than it would have been without them. http://www.economist.com/node/21539928.

Collaborating to Achieve a 2013 Work and Family Agenda

The Labor Project is a leading organization in Family Values @ Work, which held its annual conference with the Ford Foundation in December. The morning plenary brought together Patrick Gaspard, Executive Director, DNC; Raul Grijalvo, Arizona CD-3; Maya Wiley, Executive Director, Center for Social Inclusion; and Ed Ott, Distinguished Lecturer in Labor Studies at the CUNY. The panel was moderated by Heather Boushey, Senior Economist, Center for American Progress. Their combined experience enlightened the 250 participants and provided a political roadmap for the work and family agenda in 2013.

In memory of Catherine Trafton (1974 – 2012)

Catherine passed away unexpectedly in December. The Labor Project came to know Catherine when she worked as Associate General Counsel with the UAW. She was a fierce advocate for workers and their families. Especially interested in work and family issues such as child care and family leave, she negotiated them into contracts whenever she could. Said NLRB member Sharon Block: “Catherine was a warm person and a gifted lawyer, whose head and heart were fully engaged in her work. She had a remarkable ability to help put things right for working people.” Our thoughts are with her family and friends.
Behind the Kitchen Door
What Every Diner Should Know About the People Who Feed Us

In her new book, Saru Jayaraman, co-director, Restaurant Opportunities Centers United and director of the UC Berkeley Food Labor Research Center, explores the political, economic, and moral implications of eating out. Dining out affects not only our own interests over workers. We need stronger unions and higher union density — not RTW legislation that will further weaken rights, protections, and job quality. "I read her legislation that will further weaken rights, protections, and job quality." read her report at www.lire.berkeley.edu.

So we're sitting pretty. But the next thing we know, the Michigan state legislature does a stealth move and passes a "right-to-work" (RTW) law. First, can we come up with our own name, please? The law does not give one the right to work. Rather, it gives employers the right to lower wages and gut the power of unions. Says Sylvia Allegretto, a UC Berkeley economist: "There is no evidence that a state that adopts RTW laws has a boost in employment — which is always promised by RTW backers. There is, however, strong evidence that RTW lowers union density and is associated with lower wages for workers and declines in job quality as measured by having health care and/or retirement benefits. At a time of stagnant wages and extreme inequality, we need policies that will help level the economic playing field which has favored business and corporate interests over workers. We need stronger unions and higher union density — not RTW legislation that will further weaken rights, protections, and job quality."