

ONLY TWO CHOICES: EITHER PAY ENOUGH FOR DECENT SUBSISTENCE OR LET GOVERNMENT SUBSIDIZE THEIR EXISTENCE?



The recent spate of strikes by fast food workers and their colleagues at Walmart has been analyzed by economists, employment experts, human right organizations and a host of other organizations who are trying to pin down the reasons as to why the workers are striking so often – whatever the, hard to decipher technical jargon and fancy idiom reveal, the bottom line is that they are not paid enough and the wages they earn is not enough to put food on the table. Those who joined the strike across New York City, may not even have met one another or even know one another but their lives are interconnected, inasmuch as they all are likely to be earning just about \$7 an hour and what is worse and saddening is that they are all dependant on food stamps to survive – and that all of them did something, perhaps for the first time in their lives, decided to speak out, casting out fear of retaliation that was holding them back in the first place. Employers, especially fast-food joints are notorious for squeezing as much as possible from their workers and not paying them enough, simply because supply exceeds demand and they have an excuse that owing to the sluggish economy they have to cut down on their expenses – faced with the threat of layoffs, workers subject themselves to such blatant exploitation and plod on – until now. Labor unions, on the wane owing to dwindling membership, were quick to seize the moment and latch on to the new found opportunity telling the vulnerable workers that getting organized under them would help in increasing their wages and that they would get better working conditions for them. The one thing that the existing acrimony between the employers and the workers accentuates is that the workers are unable to meet their and their family's basic needs on the meager salaries that they get and the nation faces a simple unambiguous choice: Either such an economy is created in which workers can earn passably enough to put food on their tables and provide for other basic needs or the government increases it own resources and takes them under their wings and subsidizes their lives, for it is obvious that on their own they cannot survive – the sad thing is the we as a nation are doing neither. When someone goes to say a McDonald outlet and bites into a luscious hamburger, little does he realize that the hands that made it, belong to those who are amongst the lowest paid in the country. If he manages to find full time work, which is exceedingly unlikely, a fast-food worker could earn around \$18,000 a year, barely enough to keep his family of a spouse and single child, just above the poverty line. There are upwards of 2 million people working in fast-food joints and a study by the Economic Policy Institute has revealed that 75 percent of them live in poverty and that most of them are not members of a union, nor have they ever contemplated becoming members of a union. Fast-food owners and their supporters argue that the criticism against them is misplaced. They are actually doing a great service to the people by providing jobs to people with little or no education and whose fluency in English is edgy. Would it not be better, they argue, if instead of asking them to increase the wages, to provide them opportunities for education and let them learn their way up the employment ladder. However, they are overlooking the fact that such jobs are not just fill-in-the-blanks jobs. They are the jobs for the future of the country's economy. Most other jobs have been lost to automation, have been shipped outside are being done within the country by H1B Visa holders from outside the country – the American labor market has been hollowing out. However, service oriented jobs cannot be done by machines or be outsourced – they cannot be allowed to be exploited. If the employers cannot be persuaded to take on the moral responsibility, the government must take the accountability, and if the tax-payers have to pick up the tab – so be it.