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News Coverage on Pensions

Making \$7.75 an Hour, and Figuring There's Little to Lose by Speaking Out

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Shenita Simon watches a twilight rain wash across Brownsville. Softly, from her apartment in a public housing tower, she begins to talk of her life's impossible mathematics.

This 25-year-old woman with striking black eyes and hair pulled back in a bun is a shift manager at KFC — her title is good for 50 cents an hour above minimum wage. From this, she and her husband, Jude Toussaint, an unemployed antenna installer, buy clothes for their three children and food, and help her mother with the rent.

Her wages erode on all sides. Often, she said, she finds her check is hours short. And when she works overtime, she receives two checks, each at straight time, as if she worked for two different employers rather than a single KFC across from Bargain Land on Pitkin Avenue in Brooklyn.

Last year boiling oil spilled over and scalded her hands; she received \$58 a week in workers' compensation, she said. Nearly every day her manager called and demanded: When are you returning to work?

She looks you square in the eyes.

"I'm beyond not satisfied," she says. "This isn't the life I want for my children. This isn't the life I want for myself."

Forget the gilded dreams of 90th-floor penthouse-dwelling hedge fund masters for just a second. We'll mourn the ridiculously high price tag for brownstones in another column. The economic comebacks of New York, of New Jersey and of so many states ride piggyback on the growth of low-wage jobs, on the hiring of those who dip French fries in boiling oil and pull flesh off the bones of factory chickens.

Fast-food businesses have added 25,000 jobs in New York in the past decade. Last week I sat in a low-ceiling [City Council hearing room and listened and squirmed as fast-food workers](#) ^[4] — the Wendy’s hamburger slinger, the Papa John’s bike delivery man, the woman who mops floors in KFC — recounted the prosaic facts of their lives for a fact-finding panel.

There was a Mexican man with gray hair and a bushy mustache who trained as an architect. His two daughters live in Mexico and depend on him, and he sleeps in a basement and makes \$5 an hour delivering Papa John’s pizza.

“I delivered during [Hurricane Sandy](#) ^[5],” he said in Spanish. “They told us to ride bent over, so that the pizzas didn’t get wet.”

Naquasia Legrand, a 22-year-old from Canarsie, Brooklyn, works at two KFCs. She washes dishes at one for \$7.75 and mops floors at the other for \$8. She says she must work four or five hours each week off the clock.

She needed to buy a [MetroCard](#) ^[6] last week so she skipped lunch. She shakes her head. “I think I deserve to eat lunch.”

The apostles of our new economy advise us that the middle and working classes need to “retool,” to learn new skills, to become more productive. Yes, well, O.K. When, where and with what time and whose money?

There is good news to be heard here. Workers who earn minimum wage realize their employers have no real hold on their tongues.

“I’m making the minimum wage plus 50 cents,” notes Ms. Simon. “I definitely can find another job.”

A great ferment brews. The car washers of the Bronx and Brooklyn have voted to form unions, as have security guards at Kennedy Airport. Twice in the past nine months, fast-food workers — with the aid of Fast Food Forward, a community organizing and labor coalition — have rallied and demanded higher wages and an end to wage theft.

How this ends is uncertain. American labor law is a beaten cur. Strikes are risky, and fast-food corporations are well-heeled adversaries. The current campaigns hope to embarrass these corporations.

As often, though, this sector carries an immunity to shame.

Papa John’s chief executive, [John Schnatter](#) ^[7], makes \$2 million per year and lives on a faux medieval estate outside Louisville, Ky. He spoke recently of trying to subvert Obamacare’s provisions by cutting the hours of all of his workers to less than 30 hours. YUM! Brands, which owns KFC and Taco Bell and whose chief executive makes \$11.3 million per year, helped lead the battle against paid sick days.

Mention long odds to these workers and they lead you back to the mathematics. They bob along

the poverty line in an impossibly expensive city. What's to lose?

Ms. Simon, still dressed in the black KFC shirt with "The Original Original" logo, shakes her head when asked if she's worried about annoying her employer. "I have no lies to tell," she says. "This is just my life."

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