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Fast food strikes: employers should focus on job satisfaction, not wages

Fast-food protests should be a wake-up call to keep employees happy. The secret? It's not all about the money

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Emmanuel Dawson protests for higher wages outside a McDonald's restaurant in Detroit. Photograph: Paul Sancya/AP

As workers at McDonald's and other [fast-food companies protest low wages](#) around the globe, employers in a broad range of industries should be wondering what it means for them. Fast food, after all, isn't the only sector to pay minimum wage. How can others avoid ending up in a similar situation?

As a human resources and labor relations consultant who has been involved in dozens of negotiations, I've seen what happens behind the scenes before strikes begin. And the truth is, it's not all about the money.

There's an old saying in the world of employee relations: "Pay comes and goes, but work rules are forever." If your working conditions are poor or your workers aren't treated well, you could end up with unfavorable work rules negotiated by a union.

Most unions such as the [Service Employees International Union](#), which has been organizing the fast-food protests via its "worker center" group [Fast Food Forward](#), try to attract workers by selling the idea they can increase wages. And indeed, unionized workers on average earn 30% higher wages and benefits than non-union workers, Kent

Wong, director of the Center for Labor Research and Education at the University of California at Los Angeles, [previously told the Guardian](#).

But that isn't enough to garner widespread support for unionization. ([According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics](#), union membership dropped to 11% in 2013 from roughly 20% in 1983.)

Most often, employees seek unions when working conditions are poor or managers and supervisors are ineffective. It's the difference between job satisfaction and job dissatisfaction: While increasing a worker's wages may reduce job dissatisfaction, it will never increase job satisfaction.

If you want satisfied employees, pay close attention to their working conditions and the quality of their work life. It just makes sense: if you like what you are doing for a living, you are much less likely to want a union to represent you.

In addition to paying workers a decent wage, it's important to make sure the work hours are reasonable and the working conditions are decent. Most importantly, you must make sure your employees feel valued, no matter how little they are paid.

I learned this lesson early. As a teenager, I worked in a paint brush manufacturing plant during my time off from school. The plant always had a fresh coat of paint, the facility was clean and the bathroom spotless. More importantly, there was virtually no turnover among the plant workers. It certainly wasn't because of the wages!

It was because the employees felt the plant supervisors and general manager cared about them. These supervisors knew about their employees' families and their personal problems. If an employee had personal issues around money or family, the general manager was always around to help.

Unfortunately, this isn't always the case. When employees don't feel valued, they are more likely to look for help outside of the company, whether it's through unions, worker centers or strikes – or even just high turnover, which comes at a high cost to companies.

So far, these intermittent strikes and rallies protesting low wages have had little impact on the fast food industry. They haven't disrupted business because the strikes only last for an hour or so and haven't set up picket lines. Ultimately, these same workers make such low wages that they have to return to work in order to earn even a basic living.

In any case, employers need to understand that wages are decided on the way up thanks to local and state legislative initiatives: A number of states and municipalities have already raised the minimum wage above the \$7.25-per-hour federal statute, and states and cities are increasingly enacting living and minimum wage ordinances, as well as requiring sick leave and vacation accruals.

So employers should not get distracted by all the publicity surrounding low wages. Raises – in and of themselves – won't be enough to ensure that your business avoids the same negative publicity in the future. Once wages start to go up, the focus will move to securing good working conditions for employees.

Given that, employers should focus on the tools employees need to do their jobs well.

Make sure your workplace is clean, well lit and as pleasant as possible. Make sure the hours are reasonable. And most importantly, make sure your supervisors and managers are fair-minded, communicate well, and treat everyone with respect and dignity, no matter how big or small their role.

The next time you read about a rally over low wages, think about the true “job satisfiers” – working conditions and quality of life, and what you can do to improve them.

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