



Take-away food, throw-away jobs

Hailed by some as providing good entry-level jobs, the fast food industry certainly gives thousands of young Europeans their first taste of working life. But the work organisation and management practices can take a heavy physical and psychological toll.

Up to ten million people across the globe are thought to have worked for McDonald's since the world's most famous fast food chain started up in March 1955. By 2000, the company had 1.5 million workers in all five continents, by far most under 30 years of age¹. Little surprise, then, that the fast-food giant spins itself as a "stepping stone" for young people into employment². McDonald's France's latest advertising campaign claims that "80% of its contracts are permanent contracts", skipping the fact that 90% or more of its workers are on part-time and hourly contracts³. That makes it hard to see how these "permanent" contracts spell job security, as the industry's characteristically very high staff turnover⁴ shows.

The Mac model is now the de facto norm across Europe, and has been copied by the big burger and pizza chains. Part-time as standard, multi-tasking an absolute must, no scope for decision-making, and low pay in almost every case make up a "rite of passage" towards a working life in insecure employment.

Franchise operators and employment laws

A 24 year-old woman, who did not want to be identified because otherwise "the manager would make my life hell", testifies to this painful introduction to working life. Employed for the past two years by Quick, a McDonald's rival operating in Belgium and France, she tells of the unremitting psychological pressure put on staff and the victimization suffered by anyone who doesn't knuckle under: time-off requests turned down, changed work schedules without notice, being talked down to workmates, etc.

"The boss won't let me take orders at the drive-in because she says I've got too strong a local accent. She also says I'm too fat, and she's been rude about me in front of my workmates when I wasn't there", testifies the young woman.

This mother of a young child also says that work schedules are forever being changed, making any form of work-life balance nigh impossible.

But few speak out about these forms of bullying. "Those that complain to the union have

usually already left or are working their notice", says Umberto Barone, area officer for the food industry with the Belgian CSC union for the Mons region (Western Belgium). "Our region has very high youth unemployment. Franchise operators exploit that because they know their employees must have that job." As a result, practises that flout Belgian employment laws have gradually become established, especially in non-unionised franchise restaurants⁵.

This is why the CSC targeted this category of restaurants with awareness-building campaigns in recent months among customers and employees, in particular condemning practises like clocking-off.

"Employees clock on at 8 a.m. If there's a slack time around 10 a.m., they have to clock off. They stay on-site for two hours, then clock-on again at midday for the lunchtime rush", explains Bertrand Sculier, CSC Youth Officer for the Mons/La Louvière region.

The union official also condemns the abusive use of probationary periods. This consists in getting applicants to work an undeclared two-week probation period paid cash in hand. After this time, suitable applicants sign a proper contract, but with a new two-week probation period. This gives unscrupulous employers a full month's use of cheap labour, which can then be sacked if wanted at no cost.

Accidents going unreported

Transplanting the Taylorist production model into the fast food industry is not done without repercussions on health and safety at work. In a survey of over 700 fast food workers in Paris⁶, occupational doctors were surprised to find a high percentage of functional disturbances like fatigue, sleep disorders and musculoskeletal system pains in a population of young adults. In their conclusions, the survey's authors inveigh against "a work organisation dictated by the economic constraint of 80% of turnover generated in four hours a day".

An Australian survey found that most sickness absences at McDonald's were due to back and lower limb pains, usually from falls or slipping during handling operations, and severe burns. Minor burns and cuts are common but seldom reported, the study's authors found⁷.



¹ See: T. Royle, *Working for McDonald's in Europe. The unequal struggle?*, Routledge, London-New York, 2000.

² See: www.mcdonalds.co.uk.

³ T. Royle, *op.cit.*, p. 51.

⁴ See: *Labour relations in the global fast-food industry*, Routledge, 2002, 224 p.

⁵ Tony Royle, who had access to trade union figures, reports union membership levels of under 2% among staff at McDonald's in Ireland, the United Kingdom, France, Spain and Belgium. See: T. Royle, *op.cit.*, p. 95.

⁶ G. Chautard, F. Cuvillier, I. Gri-maud, C. Richoux, *Le travail dans la restauration rapide à Paris. Approche épidémiologique d'une population et incidences sur le suivi médical*, INRS, Documents pour le médecin du travail, no. 73, 1997.

⁷ C. Mayhew, M. Quinlan, "Fordism in the fast food industry: pervasive management control and occupational health and safety risks for young temporary workers", in *Sociology of Health & Illness*, vol. 24, no. 3, 2002, p. 272.

Young workers : Health at risk !



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McDonald's workers in Paris demand better treatment at work, February 2001

This under-reporting of work injuries is borne out by the personal testimony of the very few employees who dare break the silence that shrouds this sector.

"I tripped and sprained my ankle while taking out the restaurant's dustbins. The manager told me: it's not serious, just a little bruise. You put some cream on it and come in tomorrow because we need you; we've got some off", testifies the young Quick employee.

"Managers push for minor accidents not to be reported as work injuries", confirms Abdel Mabrouki, a Pizza Hut deliveryman in the Paris suburbs. In his book, *Génération précaire*⁸, this CGT union rep describes the serious risks that some managers make pizza deliverymen run, like encouraging them to flout the highway code or carry jerrycans of petrol on their mopeds.

Workwear is another example of a management practice that is an affront to staff dignity. "Restaurant managers tend to store work clothes and gloves in a

cupboard instead of issuing them to staff, just to be in order in case health and safety inspectors drop in", report CSC officials, who have found this both in franchised restaurants and directly-managed outlets. Abdel Mabrouki welcomes the fact that Pizza Hut deliverymen have finally been issued with safety footwear – a right they have won only after years of demands and a rash of strikes.

The obsession with cleanliness and spare time is another characteristic of the fast food industry's managerial culture. When not flipping burgers, Quick and McDonald's employees have to busy themselves washing floors or retrieving the disposable Coke beakers dropped by customers on the drive-in car parks. In the wonderful world of Big Mac, multitasking is not an idle term. A favourite axiom of the MacDonal'd's system founder, Ray Kroc, says it all: "If you've got time to lean, you've got time to clean"⁹. ■

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⁸ A. Mabrouki, *Génération précaire*, ed. le cherche midi, 2004, 164 p.

⁹ See T. Royle, *op. cit.*, p. 54.