

Workers of McDonald's discovered a new way of class struggle

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Russian labour market is built almost completely according to interests of the employers. Employer has a huge authority over employees, a power which is seldom limited by workers resistance. Trade unions are not everywhere, and where they are they are usually a group of bureaucrats, to whom defence of workers' rights is of little interest. One does seldom discover solidarity and mutual aid amongst waged workers, but problems related to daily work are not disappearing anywhere. Working place conflicts are everywhere, taking most different forms. Workers of McDonald's chose a quite unique way to resist, a completely unforeseen way of struggle against employers in Russia. But before going to the main theme of the article, few words about the corporation itself.

McDonald's is the biggest fast food chain in the world, according to their official website they are present in 119 countries. If in USSR in every city and village one could find a statue of Lenin and a park named after Gorki, the yellow letter "M" on red background is their capitalist equivalent. Georgian president Eduard Shevardnadze was present in the opening of the first McDonald's outlet in Georgia, that gives some picture about the financial and brand power of this global fast food chain. This reputation has not come to company without a price – in any globalisation critical demonstration a couple of outlets are trashed as symbols of the global capitalism.

Different transnational corporations producing goods for "mass consumers" have different methods of adaptation to local markets, some make their products look as local as possible, in accordance with local traditions. This is for example what Nestle does with confectionery brand "Rossiya". McDonads' uses the very opposite approach – in any point on earth one finds the same menu, almost same prices and service. There even exist such a concept as "Big Mac rate", since value of one hamburger in different countries measures oscillations between different currencies.

But McDonald's has most various kinds of problems – besides typical critics such as bad quality of food and violation of workers rights, in India McDonald's outlets have been targeted due to exploitation of cows, considered in India as sacred animals. In South America McDonald's has been criticized for destruction of the tropical rainforests. In the official website of McDonaldis one finds much promising slogan of the corporation to attract new workers: "We value You, Your career and Your input in development of our company". To put it straight: that is NOT true.

McDonald's appeared in Russia some ten years ago, in beginning as a fine, expensive restaurant. McDonald's was a fresh new thing, a symbol of the beginning of the nineties. Work was much more intensive than "Soviet citizen" had get used to, but salary was not bad, some people sacrificed their studies for such a work. But it went on like this only until "Black Tuesday" of 1998. Then salaries were cut to a fraction, and the former level has not been reached ever since (other transnational corporations followed the same pattern). But then already many enough Russians between 18 and 45 years relied on rat race of the market economy instead of planting potatoes to their 1/7 acres. Intensity of the work in McDonald's was not anymore a shock for Russians. Also prices in McDonald's became gradually affordable for average consumers. These two factors together with the pioneering gains corporation had reached in the beginning of the nineties helped McDonald's to become biggest fastfood chain in Russia, and to expand to other CIS countries as well.

Working conditions in McDonald's are tough, everything is built on a strict hierarchy. Majority of workers are "krushiks" (from English word crew), that means janitors, clerks and kitchen workers. "Krushiks" are controlled by sly and complicated hierarchy of managers, whose goal is to ensure that 100% of the working time is used for the cause of the company. Every minute of the working graphic of a "krushnik" is regulated. Most of the "krushniks" are students, who

would not find a qualified work and agree to work for a small (in Moscow around 100\$) salary which is guaranteed by reputation of the transnational corporation. Usually “krushniks” do not stay in McDonald’s very long time — few people like treadmill. Managers are a bit more old people, selected from the ranks of the “krushiks”. Managers aren’t given any free time either, but their work is easier, and salary better. And an important psychological factor is that when one already climbed first step of the ladder, he has some further motivation to stay employed in the company.

In a system where employers try to maximally exploit employees, one may not escape friction and conflicts. So a web-site appears in the autumn of 2000, the site is made by workers of McDonald’s outlet in the Pushkin square. Group publishing the site named themselves “hooligans”, their activity is covering skeletons in the closet of McDonald’s. Site publishes information about contents of the food which is sold by the chain, as well as a sort of diary from which the three following stories are extracts.

First story

Let us take such an important issue as health of the workers. As in any big industry, McDonad’s has its own professional diseases. So which kind of trouble may a person getting employed in McDonald’s expect?

First of all, swelling and tired knees, resulting varicose veins. Workers must stand all the time, and only in times of breaks they may sit down for a while (although usually the legal one hour break does not exist, and we have only 30 minutes). Second trouble is mental stress, followed by nervous breakdown in the course of time, with some people one week of work is enough. Work with clients, which are most various types is stressing in itself, besides that managers keep breathing to your neck, demanding continuous activity. Hustle and bustle all around. This is reason of the high turnover rate of the employed, this does not bother employers but first of all those in the bottom because everyone has to work for two others who just left the company. Third trouble are burns, food is cooked in very high temperatures (168–218 celsius). No matter how much you try, you may not avoid burns, especially when grilling meat. Grills are located pretty low, and pork fat easily drops to ones hands, it is also easy to accidentally touch blazing parts of the grill. Safety measures are about zero. Everything is open, drops of melting pork fat are flying all around. Sometimes spray, gel and other drugs against burns are available, sometimes not. Third professional disease is overweight, although this is not a problem for everyone. No further comments about that one!

Second story

In every corporation one does have inspections, in this chapter we cover inspections in the system of McDonald’s. These are various — inspections of quality, culture, hygienics and safety. Let us talk about the last one. Inspection day begins, it may be inspection of Ts.O. (Central Office) or SES. All SES specialists are bribed, all the results what one may expect. You may ask where are our proof, we answer in our eyes and ears. Where are their documents? “Which documents?” Nothing is made in written form, all talk only face to face. Yes, it is practice in most of the companies, but here we talk about McDonald’s which is boasting how they abide every law. Or every

law except some. Lady from SES arrives and goes around staff area, special attention is given to kitchen. This time a full hustle is going on in outlet everything is washed, brushed, glancing. But that is a pure formality, everything is always ok.

Then we have internal checks, organised by the Central Office, usually inspection of time and quality of service. For smallest deviation from standard or graphic punishments are expected along every single ladder of the hierarchy. But most outrageous was the food safety inspection, organised in the middle of last June. Lady from central office came with a stack of papers, we had been expecting her for three days during which panic passed all critical limits (hustling alone is always in the limit). Everyone is controlled, hands must be washed and rags changed every 15 minutes. Only supervisor inspection had caused something like this before! And soon we see why it must be so complicated. After such inspection outlet is given grade from A to F, and in case of grade A (which we received) all managers from the rank of second assistant to director are given a price, 40% extra on monthly salary. So it is very much in the interest of the higher management to raise profits and quality of production during this very day. But this award has no any relation to reality of junior managers and simple workers, they are yelled, their every move is controlled, juice is squeezed from them and they are thrown away. They get no any financial incentives.

Third story

In McDonald's you may also find "McBucks" and "McShop". Around twice a year workers whose work is qualified as excellent, such as those who won a competition in selling some certain product and those who have kept fulfilling rules and standards, are given "McBucks", small pieces of toy money. They are used only inside McDonald's. They include stamp of the outlet, worker's personal number and autograph of manager who gave the coupon. Nominal value of one coupon is 10 roubles (30 cents).

Then management sets up the happy date — "McShop". This is a shop, where one may buy souvenirs with this toy money, such as pens, mugs and t-shirts... to put it simply, corporate gifts. In the middle of October we had "Italian weeks", Central Office squandered "McLiras" instead of "McBucks", this toy money was well printed and designed which is unusual. In the end of the month we had "McShop", prices of souvenirs were set by the central office as well. Cost of a mug was 9 coupons, a bag costed 40 coupons, clocks were 8 coupons, t-shirts 8 coupons, cd 10 coupons and a bottle of coke 2 coupons. But the hilarious thing in all that was that these "McLiras" were given in a very stingy quantity, average worker had maybe 5 or 6 coupons. Not because they had worked little, but because conditions to get these coupons were incredibly strict. A girl runs around all day, smiles, fulfills any demands whatsoever and after all that receives one single miserable coupon, just figure out!

In the website one may read more such sketches from life inside McDonald's. This is what "hooligans" tell about themselves:

"Our site was founded in November of year 2000. Since then we have collected materials, written articles, planned design. Since September 2001 we have registered our site in internet search engines. Some 50–60 persons visite our site every day, so obviously information we are providing is interesting to people. We receive most various kinds of feedback, from "why are you doing this?" to "thanks, I was planning

to work in there but I changed my mind”. What is especially interesting is that half of our visitors are former and current employees of the company. Interest of the rest is employment opportunities or contents of the products. Main activity of our group is to provide true information about attitude of McDonald’s to its employees. We try to provide pure facts, to get readers a real picture on what is going on inside the firm. We want to tell people, that “McD” is nothing as cool as people would expect, standards are not followed, no attention paid to human rights or labour codex.”

“Hooligans” is not the first group of McDonald’s workers in Moscow fighting for their rights. Not so long time ago there was a scandal connected to an initiative to found a trade union. Management launched a campaign of serious harrasment against the initiative, but in the end union got a legal status. Union was not organised in an outlet, but in a factory providing fod for the chain, but now activity of this small union seems to have deceased.

Management of the McDonald’s in Pushkin square is well aware of the site of their unruly workers, but it is not that easy to single out who are the editors. Restaurant in Pushkin square is one of the biggest in the whole world, and has hundreds of staff. Is activity of hooligans gaining any results? Maybe. In site one may find section “progress”, which includes reports about reforms which have taken place in the outlet since the site was opened. One may suspect that partially these reforms are made by management which is afraid that protest may take more serious forms than just a site in the internet. Another success of “hooligans” is due to stupidity and ignorance of McDonald’s brandmakers. In Russia McDonald’s spends thousands and thousands of dollars to advertisement in television, they finance enormous billboard ads in streets and metro, they engage in charity, invite journalists to have a lunch and golf. But official Russian website of McDonald’s just does not exist! So a person looking for information about the corporation through any search engine very soon finds site of the “hooligans”. This way quite many people have learned about the order of things inside McDonald’s.

Success of “Hooligans” has brought some follow-up, such as another Moscovite group and groups in Minsk. In contrary to “apolitical” Moscovites, Minsk sites are clearly more left-wing. We specially recommend the second Belarussian site, where one may read characterisation of “corporate ethics” of McDonald’s in the spirit of Beavis and Butt-head.

To sum it all up, it is definitely positive that working class resistance takes place in McDonald’s, the very symbol of the “generation which chose Pepsi” (at least until they do not have to sell it...). It is also great that people do not believe in sell-out unions, but fight with the System (even if only in the framework of their own workplace) themselves, counting on themselves and their friends, putting to the process of resistance lots of creative energy. It will not be that easy to fool “hooligans” to FNPR union or to any of the Parties of “Work”. In another hand it is discouraging that yet resistance exists only in the internet, and yet it is not clear if there are chances to move struggle “offline”. It seems likely, that currently anonymous “hooligans” may only appear in daylight when we a more massive resistance movement gets organised in the fast-food chain.

Post Scriptum: Soon after publication of this article in summer of 2003, management of Pushkin square McDonald’s managed to single out and fire (lone?) author of the website, and we finally had a chance to see in the real life this person with whom we had clandestinely cooperated almost two years. But resistance against McDonald’s is to be continued.

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