

# SOFT-HANDED ACADEMIC DUDES AND MINIMUM WAGE FAST FOOD: WHAT COULD GO WRONG?

I see tweets like this one in my timeline and I brace myself for the inevitable dogpile bashing workers:

Sonic in Albuquerque says “No one wants to work anymore.”

[pic.twitter.com/CR128n60mM](https://pic.twitter.com/CR128n60mM)

– Patrick Hayes (@KOBPatrickHayes) April 14, 2021

Unemployed minimum wage workers have collected too much from state unemployment and federal aid, the old white dudes opine from their cushy home offices somewhere in McMansionburbia, nudge-nudge-winking about prescient forecasts of inflationary pressures.

Sod off, you slack-bottomed, soft-handed gits.

Unemployed minimum wage workers were most likely to be laid off early in the pandemic, and may already have been laid off not once but twice or perhaps even more, depending on location and on whether they were or are juggling one or more minimum wage jobs to make ends meet.

These are the same workers whose jobs OSHA has categorized as High Exposure Risk:

Those who have frequent indoor or poorly ventilated contact with the general public, including workers in retail stores, grocery stores or supermarkets, pharmacies, transit and transportation operations, law enforcement and emergency response operations, restaurants, and bars.

They're in the same risk class as mortuary workers who prep the bodies of those who died of COVID.

This group of workers are among the risk class most likely to experience an outbreak of COVID; just look at the workplaces where Michigan had outbreaks as of April 9:

**Michigan outbreaks by site (bolded sites are more difficult to pinpoint outbreaks to):**

1. Schools – 351 total
2. Manufacturing/Construction – 141
3. Senior/Assisted Living – 120
4. Retail – 81
5. Office Setting – 45
6. Restaurants/Bars – 44
7. Healthcare – 21
8. College/University – 20
9. Social Gathering – 20
10. Religious Services – 18
11. Other 18
12. Personal Services – 16
13. Corrections – 15
14. Agricultural/Food Processing – 9
15. Shelters – 5
16. Community Exposure, Indoor – 4
17. Community Exposure, Outdoor – 1

Not as bad as schools but how many of the K-12 and university students overlap in some way with fast food workers – either as consumers or employees?

Recall my chicken scratching from my last post about the unaffordability of the American Dream in which I calculate annual earnings for a full-time minimum wage worker:

Do the math:

Minimum federal wage \$7.25 x 40  
hour week x 52 weeks = \$15,080  
a year.

That's nowhere near enough to make a payment on the median home priced at \$301,000. It's not enough for a tiny dump of a house at one-third of median price.

The equation above already contains numerous generous assumptions: the employee makes 1) minimum federal wage,

2) at a full-time job, 3) for the entire year. For most minimum wage workers, at least one of these three points doesn't apply. Most employers who hire minimum wage workers avoid paying unemployment taxes by employing workers less than full time, which means a minimum wage worker must work two jobs (or more) to make \$15,080.

The average one-bedroom or studio apartment costs roughly \$1000 a month right now. What's left over for food, health care, transportation? Even if a worker can manage a roommate or two, what's left over for basic needs?

Gods help them if they need childcare or eldercare on top of shelter, food, health care, and transportation.

And with most employers refusing to hire minimum wage workers for more than 27-32 hours a week in order to avoid paying either unemployment insurance tax or contribute to health care, these workers are likely not to have any benefits like sick or paid time off, or any savings to offset time needed for illness.

Why would any food service or retail employer think for a moment that minimum wage workers should be beating down the doors to come back to more of the same if their health and their lives had been and could be again at risk, for an absurdly low wage? Why can't the usual pudgy white neoliberal male academic types grasp this?

The snotty, dismissive attitude by business toward minimum wage workers reflected in the tweet above – though labor appears to be an essential component to the business – also reveals both carelessness and cluelessness of these businesses. If a piece of equipment needed repair for the business to remain open, they'd fix it. But apparently remedying the problems their workers face is a step too far or opaque to the business operator.

Minimum wage workers also need the right to

organize. Amazon may pay more than the federal minimum wage, but there are businesses across the U.S. which also operate like Amazon but without the notoriety forcing Amazon to pay better wages. Those businesses must be forced to rejigger their business models. Amazon is no model employer, either; overall conditions are bad when Amazon looks good by comparison.

But demanding businesses rework their operations to protect workers' right to organize is too much to ask, one might say. Is it?

1. Today, @Kroger is closing two stores in Seattle to retaliate against a local \$4/hr hero pay law. More than 100 workers will be fired or dislocated.

Kroger made \$2.8B in profit in 2020. CEO Rodney McMullen got a pay raise to \$21M.

Some heart-breaking details are emerging. [pic.twitter.com/vP8E0w5PY8](https://pic.twitter.com/vP8E0w5PY8)

– More Perfect Union (@MorePerfectUS)  
April 24, 2021

When businesses shut down sites to avoid unionization, they are rejiggering their business model, and they are doing it at a cost to the community as well as the workers. They are eating the cost of the closures to make an ugly point.

Kroger's Seattle locations aren't the only two sites the grocer is closing for this reason. At least three more closed in California to avoid paying higher wages to their workers who are disproportionately at risk of COVID – wages mandated by local government to ameliorate the risks these workers take.

Workers need Congress to pass the Protecting the Right to Organize Act of 2019 (PRO Act) for this reason, as do their communities. Many older and disabled Americans rely on their local grocers; losing one is incredibly disruptive and expensive, especially when it creates a food

desert. No business is obligated to do business in any location, but a business willing to pull up and leave a neighborhood and damage customer relations solely because it can't (read: won't) figure out how to pay a living wage needs to do its own reorganization internally, restructuring its business model to operate ethically. A workforce which has the right to unionize may be the only way to force business to reset its thinking and operations.

In other words, if a business's profits rely on paying wages which can't support a worker, the business model isn't legitimate. Unions may be the only means to make this clear to businesses.

Something needs to give soon, because this kind of scenario will continue – a clueless business thinking it must hire anybody at less than living wages, to work in conditions which may not be safe for either employees or customers.

The Youngsville mother of two was taken aback at the offer since she was only trying to go inside to get the food that was left out of her order after going through the drive-thru a first time. The lobby was closed, so she went back to the drive-thru window to get the order straightened out.

Then she learned why the lobby was closed.

"The manager told me, 'I'm sorry. I can't open the lobby because no one wants to work,'" Picou said. "And then she asked if I wanted a job. She said they'd hire anyone at this point."

Imagine thinking a fully-staffed indoor fast food lobby is necessary in the middle of a pandemic, instead of creating a safer alternative.

Waiting for those slack-bottomed academic types to nod their heads vigorously in affirmation as they wipe the fast food mung off their faces.

You'll notice that young mother in that article  
didn't jump at the offer.