

Dicken's workhouse

Conditions in a MacDonal'd's Factory

by John Conroy
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Your kidneys may be screaming that it's time to go to the restroom, but you can't go without permission from a manager. Employees on Detroit's infamous assembly lines get longer breaks. Minor burns are common; ask the manager before you leave to put salve on them. There's no such thing as a paid holiday. Pay is a nickel above the legal minimum. If the boss doesn't like the length of your haircut, you get another one.

The profits of the company have made scores of men millionaires, and, like the auto companies did in past dec-

ades, the bosses sell the idea that the man (or woman) on the line is a teenager. The young job—they're gullible, unemployed, quick enough to serve a customer in 50 seconds and easily replaced.

"You don't have a name," says Mike Sorriano, a 23-year-old Filipino. "They don't see you. You're just there to turn a hamburger."

"You don't have a name," says veteran Bryant Cunningham, a 21-year-old black. "They yell, 'Backroom, we need a coke change.' I'd say, 'Hey, I'm back here, but my name ain't Backroom.'"

Sorriano and Cunningham turned hamburgers at the McDonald's on Wabash Av-

enue in Chicago. Thirty-two per cent of all McDonald's restaurants are owned by McDonald's corporation; the Wabash Avenue outpost is one of the other 68 per cent—the franchises. Wabash is owned by Lyon Weber Management Company, a partnership of Joseph Lyon and Thomas Weber, with offices in suburban Rolling Meadows. Lyon and Weber are among the more successful franchises in the game, owning three McDonald's in Chicago and 8 in the suburbs.

Their Wabash store, however, is the jewel of the lot. While company spokespeople declined to give out any figures on revenues there, a former manager for the partnership says the gross sales were about \$7,000 a day, or \$2.5 million per year. According to figures on revenues in McDonald's annual report, a \$2.5 million gross places Wabash among the top 11 outlets in the world.

What that means to Sorriano and Cunningham is that they turned a lot of hamburger, sometimes 1200 to 1400 a day. They cooked 40 quarter pounders at a time, turning ten burgers every 85 seconds. At every turn, they pulled ten patties off the grill, laid them on buns, dropped ten more on the grill, seared them, turned them, and seared them again.

A coating of grease slowly builds up on your arms and eyeglasses, Sorriano says, and after a while, hot specks of grease landing on your forearm won't penetrate the coating. In the busiest stores, customer demand is almost constant and grill people feel there is no letup and little slack time. Employees are drilled with the company slogan, "If you have time to lean, you have time to clean." Dissidents like Sorriano changed the theme a bit. "If you have time to lean," they said, "do it."

McDonald's, a Harvard Business School professor once said, is a "machine that produces, with the help of totally unskilled machine tenders, a highly polished product. Everything is built



Dal Photo / DeLorey

integrally into the machine itself, into the technology of the system. The only choice available to the attendant is to operate it exactly as the designers intended."

The low wages, the working conditions, and the speedup dampened morale, but at the Wabash McDonald's, they were not the only bones of contention. At Christmastime last year, the managers refused to discuss a theft from the crew's lockers, and, a few days later, nearly fired Cunningham, who'd never missed a day, after he came down with a fever while working the night maintenance job and left early to go to the hospital.

According to Sorriano and Cunningham, the managers were particularly abusive. "Basically, we thought we were being treated as less than intelligent adults," Sorriano says, and so he and Cunningham tried to organize the employees into a union.

After meeting with organizer Josephine Clark of the Hotel and Restaurant Workers local 593 (officially known as the Hotel, Motel Service Workers, Drug Store, Sports Events and Industrial Catering Employees Union), the two workers set up an organizing committee that grew to 15 and set out to get membership cards signed by their fellow employees, all black except for Sorriano, most of them in their teens, about 65 per cent of them

female. Sorriano and Cunningham wanted to take no chances and got signatures from 70 co-workers, over 50 per cent of the employees.

"Some of the most quiet people were the first to sign," Cunningham says, still amazed at the response. People from union families signed without any questions. One crew member didn't know what a union was, but after Sorriano and Cunningham explained it, he signed. "We were careful," Cunningham says. "We didn't make any promises and we said we might get fired."

To get a license to operate a McDonald's now costs \$230,000 for a restaurant with indoor seating. The land and building are leased to the franchise for 20 years, after which the franchise must pay again to stay in the game. In exchange for this initial investment, a franchise owner gets the privilege of living a life regulated by Oakbrook's Hamburger Central. If a top level company executive says a new spatula is in order, everyone must buy a new spatula. Everything is dictated, down to the order that male crew members must shave, use deodorant, wear dark-colored socks.

According to Max Boas and Steve Chain, authors of the book *Big Mac*, it is also written in the McDonald book

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