

feature

Where the dollar, not the worker, is boss

They do it all to youth

This feature is reprinted from *The Ubysey*, the student newspaper at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver.

by Tom Hawthorn

Millions have passed beneath the famous golden arches, seeking fast food salvation.

Those pilgrimages to the McDonald's shrine are simple, a matter of routine. A smile from the young priestesses, cheap food that's on your tray almost before money is exchanged and a cheerful farewell make for an alluring visit. For the customer.

But for the women on the other side of the counter, working at McDonald's is an endless regimen of painful burns, incredible pressures and sexual discrimination.

That is the gospel of the McDonald's oligarchy. This is the story of three women who no longer believe.

Beverly

Beverly, 19, says she bears the scars of her two years at McDonald's. Literally.

"Everybody who worked on french fries, and that's most of the girls, has a scar," she says, rolling up her sleeve to reveal a three-inch puckered white mark. "The managers say, 'If you're careful it won't happen.' It is inevitable, though. You're warned but . . ."

"You know, when they rush you like they do, you have to get hurt. It's just terrible."

Beverly considers herself lucky. Many of her friends at McDonald's have suffered many more numerous and painful burns. And she's convinced that the company and its management places employee safety somewhere after cost efficiency tests and selling techniques.

"Everything they do is geared towards making money efficiently," she says with uncharacteristic bitterness. "Even if that means injuries."

Beverly's reason for joining McDonald's is the same as legions of other young women's. Living at home with her mother and sister, she soon learned that a greater degree of independence was available by earning a regular pay cheque.

Lacking references, and unable to find a part-time job where the hours would not interfere too severely with her high school classes, Beverly applied and was hired. She enjoyed the challenges of her new job, but the romance was short-lived.

"It was so pressured it sometimes made me apprehensive about going to work. While walking there, I would think to myself, 'So-and-so got chewed out yesterday, will I get chewed out today?'"

She says that kind of pressure, coupled with her school load and the typical problems of adolescence, was much too intense for comfort. And while friendship was readily available at the store with the other workers, the pervading atmosphere of competition for favors with management often made it impossible for close relationships to develop.

The scheduling benefits of working soon evaporated with Beverly discovered what she calls unaccountable and senseless meetings she was expected to attend. Adding on two hours without pay for practice, and Beverly says she was quickly being lassoed into a company trap all too successful at snaring loyal employees.

"I've seen it happen. Many kids were not encouraged to go on to higher education. They were told, 'There's a life for you at McDonald's.' But there isn't — many managers leave just because they don't like the pressures and can get much more money elsewhere.



In rain or snow, MacDonald's provides a haven for those who are hungry and in a hurry. However, it's not such a haven for its employees.

photo Brad Keith

"I think their tactics are disgraceful."

Beverly says she's one of the few former McDonald's workers she knows who went on to study at university, although many first started with the intention of furthering their education.

As soon as she had saved enough money, Beverly quit McDonald's to attend UBC — and soon found she could do a similar job in a residence cafeteria, for almost one dollar an hour more.

McDonald's will continue to make the massive profits it now does, Beverly says, simply because their system is too ingrained to be beaten. While some other fast food outlets, like White Spot, do not actively oppose employee unionization, McDonald's has a long, successful history of smashing any attempts by workers to organize.

And for good company reason, Beverly says.

"Unions would ruin the system. It's a very good system because you're too young to retaliate and too concerned about making money."

For Beverly, quiet acceptance of that system financed part of her university education. And, as she says, eventually bought back her freedom.

Pat

"You know, they threatened to fire me a week and a half after I started. They scared me to death," says Pat, 19.

"You have a month probation period. Probation," she says, mulling the word over in obvious disgust, "that's what you get when you get out of prison."

The analogy is not lost on her. Pat feels she was lucky to leave McDonald's when she did, before it was too late to retrieve some of the dignity she feels she had before she started.

"I wasn't proud of working there," Pat says. "You had to be humiliated to even get a pair of jeans in those contests.

"If you didn't go along with everything, they made you feel guilty, like absolute shit."

Pat realizes putting up with conditions at McDonald's allowed her to get the well-paying, downtown department store job she now has.

Sitting in her Vancouver basement apartment, with its soft brown couch, the room feeling cold as basements always do. Pat's anxiousness to recount her experiences at McDonald's is startling. And while her apartment has all the comforts a single, middle-class 19 year old can enjoy, Pat is angry and disturbed at the amount of free work McDonald's ekes out of its employees.

Not wanting to walk home after finishing work at 1 a.m. or later, Pat would often find herself doing work. It was something almost expected of the women employees.

"You would have to wait for a manager or crew chief to finish, to drive people home. And while you're waiting, they'd always ask you to work. Of course, you would get no pay."

Margaret

Pat's friend Margaret also worked at McDonald's. But she was ambitious, eager to work her way to a better paying position. Even though it meant working many hours without pay.

"I used to do a lot of free work," says Margaret, 18. "Your chances are better if you do those things."

But she soon found that more than free labor was required for management to take notice.

"There is very definitely discrimination. I found that when I started to cross that sex barrier I took a lot of shit."

The sex barrier for women who work at McDonald's is the grill, a bastion of male dominance in the system, and an actual physical division between the sexes.

"They wouldn't let me near a grill

when I first asked," says Margaret. "They only let you practise on your own time. But guys would be taught window (serving) on company time."

"And once after I told a head manager that I had practised grill on my spare time and was interested in doing it during a shift, he said, 'Well, good for you dear,' and patted me on the back."

"After all that I wanted to do it, just to prove I could do it."

Sexual discrimination, poor wages and a disregard for safety at McDonald's forced Margaret and Pat to leave the firm, they say.

"The pressure was so great and the demands so much that you could hardly get off sick, 'cause the managers would make you feel guilty," says Pat. "Once I was working in the middle of the rush and had the flu. With all the rushing and the heat I just couldn't stand anymore. The crew chief wouldn't let me sit down because it was so busy. I went upstairs and passed out."

Margaret has a similar story — you get the feeling they all must have them — about not being allowed to take an early break.

"It was just so busy that I didn't even have time to grab a break. I left my window, threw up and then ran back downstairs to work. Now, that is sick!"

Happy Birthday!

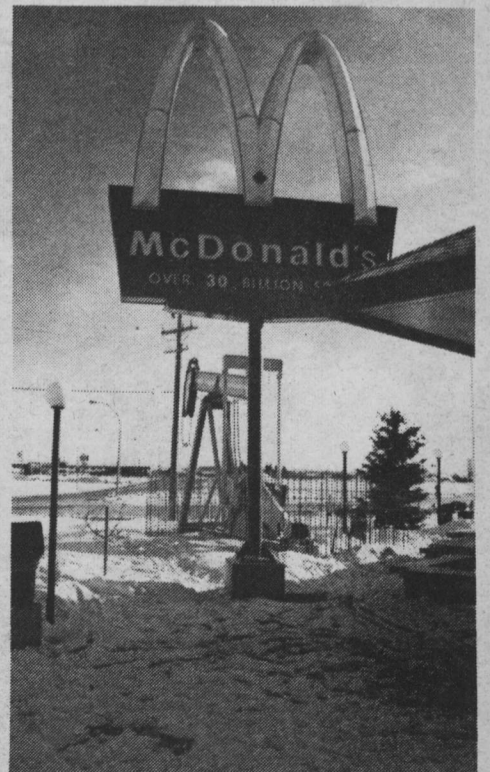
And right after the stories about being sick while at work, comes the inevitable rolling up of sleeves and the unveiling of well-hidden scars from french fry holder burns.

They complain of hourly ratings, where the total amount of sales in an hour are counted with the object of doing more than \$100 worth of business (those who do so are given badges to place on their uniforms), and ratings, where a store is given a grade for its performance. Needless to say, a poor grade means plenty of abuse for the workers, Margaret says.

Management is also very aware of its employees' birthdays — especially their eighteenth, when their minimum hourly pay must be increased. Many raises are given just before someone has that birthday, as an encouragement that the company appreciates their efforts.

Yet no matter how often Pat and Margaret warn their younger friends and relatives, they still apply to McDonald's. In a time when money is short, they are an eager resource to be tapped for fun and profit.

For profit anyways.



The Golden Arches proudly announce that over 30 billion have been served. Big deal.

photo Brad Keith