# How New York's "Fight for $15" Launched a Nationwide Movement

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Car wash and fast food workers in New York waged a gritty, three-year battle to improve their wages and working conditions, and spawned a nationwide movement to "Fight for $15."


(AP Photo/Lynne Sladky)

Workers demonstrate in Miami as part of the Fight for $15 movement, which was launched in New York City.

Brooklyn car wash worker Angel Rebolledo and Bronx fast food employee Flavia Cabral work in jobs and neighborhoods that are miles apart, but they have

remarkably similar stories to tell.

Rebolledo, a 55-year-old Mexican immigrant, was earning $600 a week to work 90 hours at the Vegas Auto Spa car wash in 2013 when he realized that he could not make ends meet and had to take a stand.

Rebolledo was getting constant nosebleeds from the harsh acids used to wash the grime off the vehicles. Along with his fellow “car washeros,” as they became known, Rebolledo joined a grassroots campaign that pushed for legislation to regulate the troubled car wash industry. In June, the car washeros celebrated the passage of New York’s first Car Wash Accountability Act, which among other provisions protects car wash workers from wage theft.

Across town in the Bronx, 53-year-old Dominican immigrant Flavia Cabral had also reached a breaking point. Juggling two minimum wage jobs, one at a fast food restaurant and the other at a shipping company, Cabral was more worried about sustaining her family on $8.75 an hour than she was about her painful deep fryer and oven burns. Like the car washeros, Cabral and her fellow fast food workers organized to take a stand. The upshot was that in September, Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo approved a proposal by the state’s labor commissioner to raise fast food workers’ pay to $15 an hour.

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The stories of Rebolledo and Cabral speak volumes about what it takes to translate worker protests into concrete policy action. The efforts of the car washeros and the fast food workers didn’t succeed in a vacuum. They built on a strong infrastructure of community organizations in New York that had the capacity to translate worker protest into power. This movement had its roots in the Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter protests, which raised public awareness about economic and racial injustice.

Historically, successful worker movements have relied on two things: employees who have reached their breaking point and are willing to take risks, and community

organizers with the power and resources to stand behind workers on the front lines.

That's what happened in Memphis in 1968, when 1,300 black sanitation workers, fed up with low wages, long hours, discrimination, and dangerous working conditions, walked off the job for more than two months. The deaths of two workers crushed by a malfunctioning garbage truck had been the flash point that led to the legendary strike. The workers were supported by unions and civil rights advocates, most notably Dr. Martin Luther King, who **was assassinated** in Memphis days before he was set to join a march in support of the workers.

Rebolledo, Cabral, and their fellow New York workers have been fighting for the same things the sanitation workers were seeking almost 50 years ago, including a better future for their children and an end to on-the-job discrimination. The New York workers were backed by unions, workers, clergy, and politicians. Their joint efforts launched the campaign known as Fight for $15, as well as similar campaigns around the country to help America's families earn a decent wage.

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The successes of the car washeros and the fast food workers culminated a gritty three-year effort that brought together dissimilar allies. The car washers make up a workforce of only 5,000 laborers, mostly Spanish speaking immigrants. By contrast, the city's fast food industry relies on a behemoth force of 63,000 low-wage workers.

But both groups employed many of the same tactics, working on parallel tracks as they organized, rallied and protested their way to becoming political forces. And both leveraged a progressive infrastructure special to New York, a left-leaning state that is home to the country's largest city.

Both sets of workers faced big hurdles. The car wash workers had to organize mainly undocumented groups of immigrants who did not speak English and were politically disenfranchised. They worked for individually-owned car washes, setting up fragmented battles between one set of workers and an owner. Often, the workers faced retaliation

from owners who threatened to fire them or call immigration authorities, said Maria Gonzalez, who worked to organize the car washeros with the grassroots group, New York Communities for Change.

The fast food workers, for their part, faced opposition from such powerful business groups as the **National Restaurant Association**, which filed a court appeal in December to challenge the wage increase, and by the **Business Council of New York State**, which feared the economic impact on the restaurants. These groups aligned politically with state Republican legislators, who came out in force against the increase.

It made for a rough-and-tumble campaign, even in a state that was fertile ground for a low-wage worker movement.

Organizing and union stalwarts, including the Service Employees International Union; the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union; and such grassroots groups as Make the Road New York and New York Communities for Change, helped the workers assemble and expand their ranks. Organizers coached the workers on how to approach and voice their concerns to lawmakers. Even places of worship offered emotional, physical, and financial support, such as the Kolot Chayeinu synagogue in the **Park Slope community**, which raised $10,000 for the car washers.

The car washeros and fast food workers also launched their effort at a politically opportune moment. Cuomo was eager to win back progressives who had criticized and distanced themselves from his administration. In less than a year, he went from calling $13-an-hour wage hike a “nonstarter” to backing a $15 per hour minimum wage.

The combination of fed-up workers, motivated organizers, and political opportunity created a perfect storm.

“Change can happen at the intersection of great organizing and electoral opportunities,” said Bill Lipton, New York State Director of the Working Families Party. “That combination created a magic moment.”

**New York City's car wash industry** has long been plagued with labor law and safety violations.

A **2008 investigation** by the New York State Department of Labor found that car wash workers were losing $6.6 million in wages due to widespread violations of minimum wage, overtime and meal break laws.

Community groups that mobilize low-wage workers, such as New York Communities for Change and Make the Road New York, had been hearing complaints for years from the city's immigrant residents about wage theft and dangerous working conditions in the car wash industry.

In March, 2012, the two groups teamed up with the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union to launch the Wash New York campaign. The idea was to organize the city's car washeros, most of whom worked in about 200 independently owned businesses.

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Rebolledo, who works at the Vegas Auto Spa in Brooklyn's Park Slope, a gentrified, wealthy city neighborhood, was among the early joiners. It was 2013, and Rebolledo was making $6.50 an hour at a time when the state minimum wage was $8 an hour. He'd been working in the car wash industry for eight years by then, and felt the financial pinch acutely as he struggled to send money to his teenaged son and daughter in Mexico.

"That's why we decided to organize," Rebolledo said in a recent interview. "It was too much for us."

Neither the Vegas Spa car wash owner, Marat Leshehinsky, nor his lawyer, Stephen Hans, returned repeated calls for comment.

One organizer on the front lines was Rocio Valerio, a community organizer with New

York Communities for Change. Describing the conditions during that time, Valerio recalled how car wash workers complained that their bosses wouldn't even bother to learn their names. Instead, they whistled or called them "cabron," a Spanish insult that loosely means bastard.

She said the workers dealt with corrosive acids daily but were not provided protective gear, such as gloves or goggles.

For months, Valerio and other organizers recruited workers to unionize. **In September 2012**, workers at two Queens car washes voted to join the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union. It was the first time in the city's history that car wash workers had unionized.

The union drives were accompanied by strikes, including one at Vegas Auto Spa, where Rebolledo was helping lead the effort to unionize.



The turning point came in March, 2015, said Deborah Axt, co-executive director of Make the Road New York. A strike at the Vegas car wash was dragging into its fourth month. Two council members—Democrats Brad Lander and Carlos Menchaca—along with Retail union president Stuart Appelbaum, were arrested at a high-profile rally where fast food and security workers had joined in solidarity.

"Here are people who provide a service to us in this community, whether they live in the community or not ... We want to stand up with them," Lander explained in an interview.

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“The first thing that we see is that he’s paying the amount we deserve to get to be paid,” Rebolledo recalled. “We don’t work under a lot of pressure like we did before. We don't have to work more hours than we’re supposed to work.”

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Three months later, New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio signed the Car Wash Accountability Act, which requires the city’s car washes to be licensed and bonded.

**Across town at the same time**, fast food workers were ramping up a movement of their own.

SEIU organizer Kendall Fells didn’t know what to expect the first time he met with 40 fast food workers gathered at the American Federation of Teachers union hall in New York one September night in 2012.

New York Communities for Change contacted him in the summer after field organizers heard from fast food workers that they were struggling to earn a wage that allowed them to get off of federal assistance and possibly even save money. They couldn’t make ends meet on the city’s minimum wage at the time of $7.25 an hour, the workers told him.

Their stories of financial struggle are common for New York’s minimum wage fast food workers. In testimony before the New York State Department of Labor Wage Board in June, James Parrott, chief economist for the Fiscal Policy Institute, said six in ten fast food workers in New York rely on some form of public assistance to make ends meet.

That September night, Fells learned about the daily struggle of the workers, some who told of being homeless and sleeping in the back spaces of the restaurants where they worked.

Fells was also struck by the literal scars each worker carried. One by one, people rolled up their sleeves or pulled up their shirts to show where they’d been burned from

preparing food on a fryer or a grill.

The workers also described the indignity of sensing that they were less important than the food they were producing. At that first meeting, one woman said she was fired for drinking water out of a medium cup rather than a small one; another described being fired for eating a single chicken nugget, Fells said.

That first meeting gave rise to the Fight for $15 movement in New York City and became a blueprint for the campaign by that name nationwide.

The organizing effort was swift. Those who attended the first meeting recruited co-workers and friends. A second meeting in October drew 80 people; another in November drew 100.

The first strike in November, 2012 was relatively small. Two-hundred employees representing 30 fast-food restaurants from all five boroughs walked out, demanding higher pay, better working conditions and the right to unionize.

“People thought it was crazy,” Fells recalls with a laugh. The idea had support, but outside of Fells and the workers, few expressed confidence in its feasibility.

But with each action, local leaders, such as Councilman Jumaane Williams, a Brooklyn Democrat, and more workers, such as Cabral, joined the collective.

Cabral says she had no choice but to join when a friend recruited her. She says she arrived in the United States from the Dominican Republic as a wide-eyed 21-year-old in search of the American Dream. By the time she went on strike in December, 2012, the dream was being put to the test.

It costs **$8,227 a month** for two adults and two children to live in the New York metro area. Cabral earned between $300 and $400 a week.

So the mother and grandmother marched in the cold, leaving her daughters to worry about her and even tease her a little.

“My oldest said ‘Mommy, you look like a hippie!’” Cabral, 54, recalls one of her daughters saying. “I told her that I was fighting for something. Then she said, ‘I know. I’m proud of you.’”

On April 15, 2015, 60,000 workers in 200 cities walked off their jobs and marched under the Fight for $15 banner. What began with a small group of workers in the nation’s largest city grew into a major movement that included groups of fast-food workers, as well as underpaid folks from Walmart workers and childcare assistants to adjunct professors. At least **six local governments** have raised minimum wages to $15 an hour with proposals pending in others.

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**The work of Cabral, Rebolledo, and thousands of** has deepened the national conversation about how to help Americans most help, but the fight continues.

The Car Wash Accountability Act is on hold because of a **suit** filed in October by the Association of Car Wash Owners, which represents about 90 operators in the city. The association says the act unfairly penalizes shops that are not unionized with higher costs.

And the $15 an hour increase faces a legal challenge al Restaurant Association, which argues that Cuomo’s wage increas workers is invalid because only the state legislature can pass a wage hike.

Still, the movement has come a long way from its origins, when many saw the demand for a $15 an hour minimum wage as a quixotic and l

“It started out as a very aspirational demand and no e okay, we can win

this," said Steve Savner, director of public policy for Community Change, a Washington, D.C.-based organization that helps organize low-income families.

At their root, the advances in New York are the result of people declaring their value in a society that disrespects their contribution and struggles, said **Jane McAlevey**, a community organizer and author of *Raising Expectations and Raising Hell: My Decade Fighting for the Labor Movement*.

Says McAlevey: "Dignity is the first value of organizing and that would be true for the Memphis sanitation strikers through the car wash workers in New York City."

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