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OPINION

Workers Exploited by Your Tax Dollars

McDonalds not the only low wage player

BY MARTHA BURK

McDonald's really stepped in it this summer when the fast food empire created a budget for its underpaid employees to help them make ends meet on the low wages they bring home after flipping burgers all week.

At first, the McBudget didn't include any money for food or gasoline, then it fixed that by telling its full-time workers to get a second job. It allocated only \$20 a month for health insurance — less than half of what it costs to carry McDonald's most affordable coverage option.

The golden arches deservedly came under fire and faced widespread ridicule.

This blunder underscored how huge corporations like Mickey D's and Walmart are responsible for the majority of our nation's low-wage jobs. But there's an-



other player in this mix that's responsible for creating more poverty-level jobs than these two companies combined. It's good ol' Uncle Sam.

That's right. The federal government supports more U.S. low wage jobs than McDonald's and Walmart put together, according to a recent report from Demos.

One reason why we don't hear much about it is that these exploited workers don't get a paycheck directly from the U.S. Treasury. They work for contractors — companies that are paid with your tax dollars to staff government facilities and do government-funded work around the country.

Contractors get big bucks to make goods, like military uniforms, and provide services. These companies do construction jobs, employ home health care workers, and are responsible for cleaning government buildings.

Though the contracts can total billions of dollars, frontline workers are paid at poverty levels. After decades on the job, these

workers may never get a raise that brings their pay above our paltry minimum wage.

Guadalupe Rodriguez is an example. She has worked for almost 20 years for a janitorial company at Union Station, a federal property. She receives no benefits and has never made more

than the minimum. Workers who are undocumented, and there are some, are paid in cash and cheated out of even that lowly sum.

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These workers exploited by companies raking in your tax dollars number about two million. On top of that, there are at least one million underpaid farm work-

ers taken advantage of by Big Ag companies subsidized with government handouts. Well, some of these underpaid federal contract workers are mad as hell, and they're not going to take it anymore. Rolling strikes in Washington have been held this summer at the Smithsonian Insti-

tution, Union Station, and the Ronald Reagan building. Led by the union-backed Good Jobs Nation, the strikes are sure to spread to other cities with large numbers of government-contracted workers.

The Demos report urges President Barack Obama to is-

sue an executive order that would mandate higher wages and benefits as a condition of federal contracting, an already common practice at the municipal level.

Better yet, why not cut out the middlemen? Uncle Sam used to employ people directly, with decent wages and benefits. Now those jobs are outsourced to corporations making big profits on the backs of workers.

By allowing contractors to pay low wages and no benefits, the federal government is forcing us taxpayers to pick up the tab for the help these employees must have to make ends meet — services like Medicaid, food stamps, and subsidized child care.

There's no sane reason why corporations should be allowed to benefit from billions of your tax dollars to line their already overflowing pockets, all the while keeping your neighbors in poverty.

Martha Burk is the director of the Corporate Accountability Project for the National Council of Women's Organizations.

Justice for Trayvon is About Justice for all

America continues to devalue young black men

BY MARC H. MORIAL

In the weeks since the not-guilty verdict in the second-degree murder trial of George Zimmerman, widespread outrage and legitimate questions about the treatment and perception of young black men in America have reverberated throughout the nation.

In an unscripted appearance in the White House Press Room, President Obama spoke personally about the historical racial context and the negative pre-conceptions that may have led to the death of Trayvon Martin. He also talked about the racial indignities and systemic disparities that millions of black men face every day



and the questionable Stand Your Ground laws that may be causing more violence than they are supposedly meant to prevent.

And the President suggested he would use his "convening power" to engage a cross-section of citizens in doing more to give African American boys "the sense that their country cares about them and values them and is willing to invest in them."

We applaud the President for his insightful comments. We hope they touch the nation's conscience and advance the kind of dialogue and action that is needed to heal America's festering racial divisions and prevent the deaths of more Trayvon Martins.

The death of Trayvon Martin has re-energized the civil rights community and inspired an outpouring of citizen action not seen since the height of the movement 50 years ago.

In dozens of cities across the

nation, thousands of people, appalled at the Zimmerman verdict, attended peaceful rallies in support of justice for Trayvon Martin and a civil rights investigation into his killing. The National Urban League stands in solidarity with them.

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We will be intensifying our quest for a thorough civil rights investigation, along with efforts to end to racial profiling and abolish of Stand Your Ground laws across the country. Many of those "shoot first" laws are contributing to needless bloodshed and are ripe for unequal application based

on race.

A recent study by Texas A & M University found that Stand Your Ground type laws increase homicides by 17-50 percent, "which translates into as many as 50 additional justifiable homicides a year."

And as the case of Marissa

Alexander shows, the Florida law is not even being applied consistently. Alexander, who is black, is serving 20 years in prison for firing a single shot at the ceiling to scare off her abusive husband who was charging towards her with murderous intent.

Unlike the Zimmerman case, a

Stand Your Ground self-defense claim did not prevent Alexander's conviction. Clearly, something is wrong when the man who killed Trayvon Martin is acquitted, while a black woman who fired a warning shot gets 20 years.

As President Obama noted, "there is a history of racial disparities in the application of our criminal laws, everything from the death penalty to enforcement of our drug laws." These disparities are more than demeaning, they are leading to the over-incarceration, under-employment and disenfranchisement of millions of African American men.

The death of Trayvon Martin has ignited a firestorm of protest. And it's not just about the shooting, but the many ways America continues to devalue young black men. Justice for Trayvon is about justice for all.

Marc H. Morial is president and chief executive officer of the National Urban League.