

# Connie Ogletree

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***“My highest aspirations for the workers I organize is for them to realize some of their dreams.”***

Former fast-food worker and new union organizer shares the value of a living wage for low-income workers

*Connie Ogletree started working at McDonald’s in 2012 to support herself and her son after her marriage ended. At first, she was happy to have employment. But she soon realized that she could not make ends meet. Along with most of her co-workers, she earned the federal minimum wage (\$7.25 an hour), had no benefits, and had to receive food stamps to feed her son. After speaking with a representative from Fight for \$15, a national campaign aimed at supporting low-wage workers’ efforts to win at least \$15 an hour and a union, she decided to do something for herself and others who were afraid to speak up for themselves. Ogletree began participating in strikes, marches, and other Fight for \$15 events to advocate for a living wage—all while pursuing an associate degree in business administration. After two years of working at McDonald’s, she landed a job as a union representative for NUHHCE, where she represented the interests of low-wage hospital employees.*

*Her saga as a fast-food worker challenges the stereotypes about who these workers are. While most people believe the average fast-food worker is a teenager, 53 percent of all fast-food workers are 21 or older with at least a high school degree, and more than one-fourth are raising a child. Approximately 13 percent of fast-food workers make at or below the federal minimum wage and about 70 percent earn between \$7.25 and \$10.10 an hour (the minimum wage proposed by Congressional Democrats). Given their low salaries, the majority of fast-food workers and their families qualify for public assistance, costing taxpayers an estimated \$7 billion annually.*

*Ogletree’s experience in the fast-food industry gave her insight into the injustices faced by workers and cemented her commitment to organize until low-wage workers can earn at least \$15 an hour.*



Once I got married, I stopped working except for temporary or seasonal jobs to pay a bill or buy clothes for my kid or for myself. At one point I was very content being a mother and a homemaker. It was very satisfying to make sure that my husband's clothes were out of the cleaners, his shoes were shining, and he looked fresh when he went to work. I did all of that. I kept the house clean.

I've had two marriages. My first husband was in the U.S. Air Force and we stayed married for

Kreme, Dunkin' Donuts, McDonald's, Wendy's and Captain D's and make our voices heard by chanting: "We cannot survive on \$7.25. Nobody can survive on that little money."

If you work two jobs making \$7.25, and you work 40 hours a week on both jobs, you don't have time for anything else. If not for the people that flip the burgers, mop the floors, clean the windows, and make sure that the score is at least 95 when the health inspector comes, those businesses wouldn't thrive the way that they do.

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about 12 years. That husband is deceased now. My second husband will soon be my ex. Once I left him, I had to go back into the workforce in order to continue to feed my son and myself. But I didn't have a stable work background because I'd worked on and off for years, and I didn't have a degree. Most employers want longevity on the job. My son said, "Mommy, why don't you just get a job at McDonald's?" So I went online, applied at McDonald's, got a quick response, and started working with them. I worked with them for two years. Fast food didn't care about my background. And I quickly found out why. It's because they don't care too much about anything. They just want to make the money.

We didn't have a union, but I was very active in all Fight for \$15 protests. We would go to Krispy

After about two months of working at McDonald's, I went back to school. Then I started organizing people in the healthcare industry. They are predominantly African American. You have a lot more women, but there is a significant number of men. Most of the men are older. The younger guys are few and far between.

I would go to different hospitals or nursing homes or rehab centers and talk to people in housekeeping, people who are in the kitchen and in maintenance. I asked them if they are satisfied with the money that they're making. I asked them if they know that people in the North make three or four times the money that they make for the same job. Nine times out of 10, they don't know unless they're from the North or from another part of the country where they had the same type of job.

What made me proud about my work is that I was opening eyes. I was making people aware of information that has always been out there and showing them that they could still be a part of the booming and growing world that we live in. They don't have to sit around and wait on food stamps and a check every two weeks. They can get that check and go to the grocery store and buy groceries with what they make.

When I was introduced to the labor movement and the organizers of the fast-food workers, I immediately wanted to join in because my livelihood was at stake. I was already in school, trying to better myself, but it wasn't moving fast enough. I wanted to jump at anything that I could so that I could make \$15 an hour, stay in school, maybe buy a car, not have to get home at 11

o'clock at night off the bus, and then get back up at four and get back on the bus.

Now I have a brand new car. I offer people rides home from their jobs so that I have an opportunity to talk to them when they're off work. It's just been amazing to me. Like a dream come true.

My highest aspirations for the workers that I organize is for them to realize some of their dreams: to be able to go on a two-week vacation, to put kids through college, to buy their kids some of the fancy stuff that they can't have because they can't afford it. I want them to be able to luxuriate in a hot bath because the kids are out on a play date. Just enjoying the money that they're making.

About **13%** of all fast-food workers make at or below the federal minimum wage and about **70%** make between \$7.25 and \$10.10 an hour.

Source: <http://www.cepr.net/documents/publications/fast-food-workers-2013-08.pdf>