



OPINATED ESSAY WCT PREPARATION TIPS

Important NOTE: Beginning with Packet #80 (summer 2011), the requirements for the WCT essay have changed. Please read the cover pages carefully. Note that you **MUST** make at least some use of ALL articles in the WCT packet in your essay.

WCT Structure Sample Outline

Structure is extremely important to any essay or research paper, including the WCT. Good structure helps your reader follow your discussion in the same way that good driving directions help you arrive at your destination without any wrong turns. There are many ways to structure a good essay, but several components are important:

- Division of paragraphs to show where each new idea starts
- Clear topic sentences which state the main point at the beginning of each paragraph
- Transitional words and phrases to show the progression of ideas and help the reader move smoothly from one idea to the next

The sample outline below shows one way to structure an essay:

Paragraph 1: Introduction

Begin your introduction with a general statement to reveal your topic. Then narrow the topic until you get to your main issue. State the thesis (your position on the issue) in one clear sentence at the end of the introduction.

Paragraph 2: Supporting point #1

- State the point clearly in your topic sentence
- Explain the point briefly to tell the reader what you mean
- Support the point with material from sources (quote or paraphrase) or with something from your own experience

Paragraph 3: Supporting point #2

- State the point clearly in your topic sentence
- Explain the point briefly to tell the reader what you mean
- Support the point with material from sources (quote or paraphrase) or with something from your own experience



WCT PREPARATION TIPS

Paragraphs 4: Supporting point #3

- State the point clearly in your topic sentence
- Explain the point briefly to tell the reader what you mean
- Support the point with material from sources (quote or paraphrase) or with something from your own experience

Paragraph 5: Conclusion

Bring the discussion back to the thesis and wrap it up

The format shown above may seem simple, and it is! Still, it is quite functional and will work with nearly any type of written piece from a five-paragraph essay to a much longer research paper.

It is usually helpful to outline before writing. Remember that it is permissible to have an outline written in your WCT packet when you go in to take your exam. If you have an outline, you will not panic and forget what you wanted to write.

One note about structure:

Your paragraphs should have a logical order. You may want to put your points in chronological order, order of importance, etc. Some key phrases (called "transitions") can help your reader follow your essay. Such phrases as "First," "Next," and "Finally" or repetition of key words can serve as transitions. Could your reader cut the paragraphs apart with scissors, then reconstruct the essay in the same order? If not, then see if some new transitional phrases would help.

LETTER FROM DHARAMSALA

AFLAME

A wave of self-immolations sweeps Tibet.

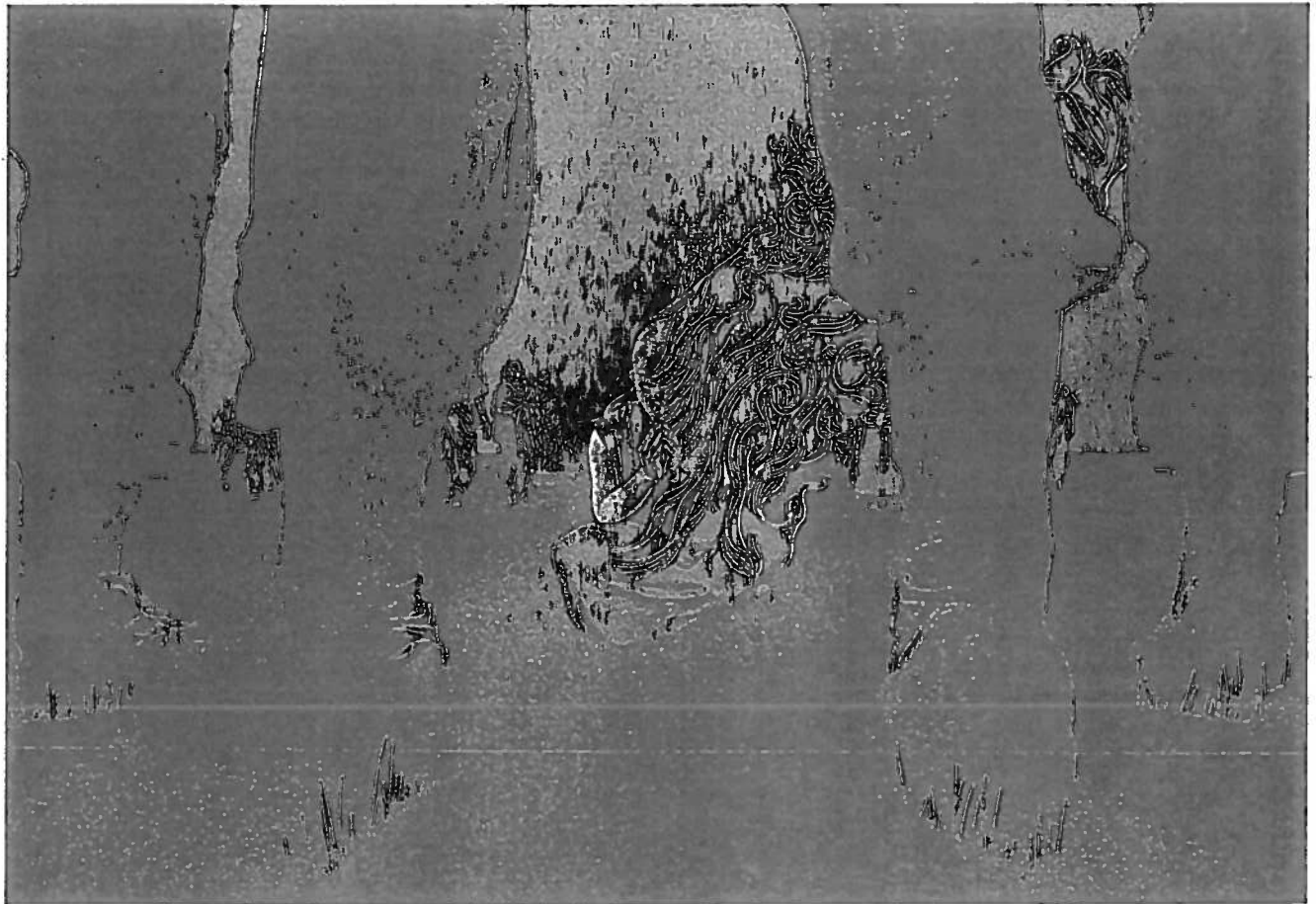
BY JEFFREY BARTHOLET

On January 12th, the day that Tsering Tashi set himself on fire, he didn't seem particularly troubled. He ate an early breakfast with his wife and his parents in the house they shared in a village near Amchok, a historically Tibetan township in China's Gansu Province. Then he took the family

was a frigid, overcast day. Tashi told his mother that he wanted to wear a traditional Tibetan cloak, or *chuba*. "You should wear a nice thick one," she said. She asked if Tashi would like to join her for lunch, but he said that he needed to get back to work.

Tashi stopped to see his friends and

his cloak, doused his clothes in gasoline, and set himself alight. He had wrapped wire around his limbs, apparently to insure that the fuel-soaked clothing would stay in place. As flames engulfed his body, he fell to the ground. Then he got up and ran, darting away from some Chinese police he saw on the road. Finally, he collapsed again, the flames sweeping this way and that in the wind. As his clothes turned to ash, Tashi managed to raise his arms and bring his hands together in a final gesture of Buddhist prayer. "Gyawa Tenzin Gyatso," he called out. "His Holiness the Dalai Lama." A thirteen-second video, apparently shot by a passerby with a phone, shows Tashi's flaming



In the past two years, well over a hundred Tibetans have set fire to themselves in protest against Chinese rule.

herd—most of the animals were *dzomos*, female yak-cow hybrids prized for their milk yield—to frozen grasslands nearby. He was twenty-two years old and an accomplished horseman, and his family was well respected locally. Tashi watched the animals graze for a few hours, then went home around noon, leaving the herd in the care of friends. It

asked if they would look after his animals a little longer. "I have to go into town," he said. "There's something I need to do there." He seemed to be carrying something heavy in the folds of his *chuba*, but they didn't ask what it might be.

When Tashi got to the main square of Amchok, he took a container from

body at the moment he raises his arms. In the background, a Tibetan woman hurries a shocked child past the blazing man.

In the past two years, well over a hundred Tibetans have immolated themselves in protest against Chinese rule. The demonstrations have spread across the Tibetan plateau, both in Chinese

provinces with significant Tibetan populations—Sichuan, Qinghai, Gansu—and in the Tibet Autonomous Region. In 2011, a dozen Tibetans set themselves ablaze—most of them monks or former monks of Kirti Monastery, a Tibetan Buddhist monastery in Sichuan. Last year, more than eighty Tibetans—monks and nuns, farmers, nomads, students, restaurant workers, and at least one writer—burned to death. The oldest was in his early sixties; the youngest was just fifteen.

Chinese security forces in Tibet quickly seal off areas where immolations occur, to block independent news coverage. Documentaries on the state-run network CCTV portray immolators as delinquents and dupes of the “Dalai Lama clique” and other outside powers, and fire extinguishers have been installed in Tiananmen Square, in case any Tibetans try to set themselves ablaze there. Financial benefits are withheld from the relatives of self-immolators, and there are large rewards for information about people who incite or abet them, an activity that can lead to a charge of “intentional homicide.” Early this year, a monk received a suspended death sentence (which in practice generally means life imprisonment) after being convicted of instigating eight immolations. A foreign-ministry spokesperson told reporters, “We hope that the international community can clearly see, via this judgment, the sinister, malicious methods used by the Dalai Lama clique.” According to the court, the man was working at the behest of monks from Kirti Monastery living in exile in India, an accusation that the monks deny.

Many of the immolations have been captured on camera, and footage and photographs circulate among Tibetan activists. On one level, the protests are a form of political theatre, designed to attract sympathetic attention to the cause of a free Tibet, but their more immediate aim is harder to pin down. There is little likelihood that Chinese policies will change significantly, or that other countries are prepared to expend much diplomatic energy on the matter. Yet, according to Robert Barnett, the director of the Modern Tibet Studies Program at Columbia University, the more oblique aspect of the protests is

nizably Tibetan—the self-expression of a people who have long been deprived of the fundamental freedom to organize and express themselves politically. He told me, “It’s a hidden politics—a politics without words, a politics of symbols, a politics of gestures.”

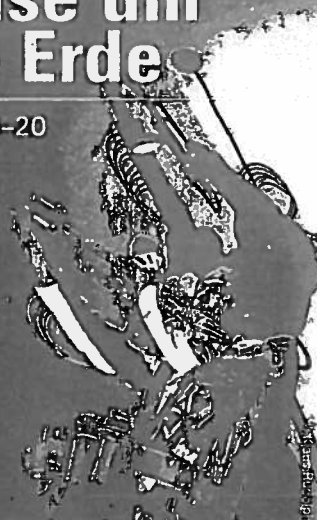
The tensions between China and Tibet go back more than a millennium. In the eighth century, Tibet was a sizable empire, extending into Central Asia; under the Mongols, in the thirteenth century, it was almost completely overpowered. For long periods, Tibet and China were politically linked while remaining culturally and ethnically distinct: Chinese emperors sent official representatives to Lhasa, the capital of Tibet, where they served as symbols of Chinese authority. Tibet was most assertive when China was weakest. After the collapse of the Qing dynasty, in 1912, the thirteenth Dalai Lama declared Tibet independent, but in 1950, after the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, the Communists invaded a poorly defended border region and negotiated an agreement that brought Tibet all but entirely under Beijing’s control. Many Tibetans resisted the creeping military takeover, and in 1959, during a failed uprising, the Dalai Lama fled to India.

In the People’s Republic, Tibetans became one of fifty-five officially recognized ethnic minorities. James Leibold, an Australian Sinologist who specializes in China’s ethnic politics, explains that the Communists, faced with the country’s demographic diversity, created a large number of autonomous areas. In theory, minorities had the right to preserve or reform their language and customs, and their regions were given preferences in education and in development funding. But autonomy was severely compromised, in part because of the dominance of the Han Chinese, who make up more than ninety per cent of the over-all population. Leibold believes that a consensus is emerging among China’s political elite that the model of autonomous regions should be jettisoned in favor of assimilation. The pro-assimilation camp points to the breakup of the Soviet Union as a cautionary tale.

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dermines national unity. "They say, the problem may be bad now, but it will only get worse if you don't reduce the identification of Tibetans with their own nationality," Leibold said.

To promote integration, Beijing has invested heavily in infrastructure, building roads and railways across the Tibetan plateau. This has led to better standards of living, particularly for a Tibetan elite that has adopted the language and entrepreneurial outlook of the Chinese. But Tibetans maintain that locals often lack the education and the capital to participate in the boom and that the main beneficiaries have been non-Tibetan migrants, mostly Han Chinese. Furthermore, the imposition of Mandarin Chinese in schools and the settlement of nomads have diluted the Tibetan language and culture. A 2009 report by independent Chinese researchers, studying the causes of a mass Tibetan protest a year earlier, found that "the current rapid process of modernization has not given the ordinary Tibetan people any greater developmental benefits; indeed, they are becoming increasingly marginalized." The report mentions that many employers consider Tibetans lazy and lacking in business sense. It goes on to say that "non-Tibetans control all major aspects of the local economy," and that "Tibetans have no way of competing with non-Tibetans in the modernization process."

Amid mass protests, including attacks on businesses owned by Han Chinese, the Dalai Lama has consistently advocated dialogue over confrontation. His position, known as "the Middle Way," and formally adopted in the nineteen-eighties, involves renouncing the demand for independence in the hope of securing meaningful autonomy. Yet nine rounds of negotiations ended without result in 2010, and Tibetans worry that China is simply waiting for the Dalai Lama, who is seventy-seven, to die, leaving them without their most powerful symbol of national identity and international support. Lodi Gyari, who was the lead negotiator with China until he resigned last year, said that, if so, the Chinese are miscalculating. He told the Chinese delegates, "Once this Dalai Lama is either too old to be effective or, sadly, not there, then the resentment of

the Tibetan people against you will be a hundred times more than what they feel now."

The Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government-in-exile are based in Dharamsala, a hill town in the north of India, three hundred miles from the border with the Tibet Autonomous Region. The town is a cluster of villages, and the Dalai Lama's residence and the main temple complex are in the village of McLeod Ganj, high up in the hills. There are several streets with shops, sidewalk stalls, and small restaurants. Tibetan monks and nuns with shaved heads and crimson robes walk among tourists bargaining over Buddha statues, jewelry, and colorful scarves. The buildings are covered with posters advertising Tibetan massage, meditation, yoga, and Hindi lessons. Larger posters and billboards commemorate self-immolations, and whenever one occurs activists organize a solemn candlelit procession.

The exiled wing of the Kirti Monastery, established by the lama Kirti Rinpoche after he fled Tibet half a century ago, is a multi-story concrete structure, a five-minute walk from the Dalai Lama's residence. The monastery is built into the side of a hill, with a view of the valley below and snowcapped peaks above. In February, I went there to visit Kanyag Tsering, a thirty-four-year-old monk who spends most of his days and evenings collecting information about self-immolations and other activism in the region surrounding the main Kirti Monastery, on the Tibetan plateau. He fled Tibet when he was nineteen, during a period of "reeducation" campaigns, in which Tibetans were forced to pledge their loyalty to the Communist Party and denounce the Dalai Lama.

Tsering works with another monk, Lobsang Yeshe, in a storage room that has been converted into an office. Like reporters, the two monks gather tips and try to substantiate them, passing on what they find out to N.G.O.s, media outlets, and agencies of Tibet's government-in-exile. A lot of information comes from other exiles, but they also talk to people inside Tibet, who speak in hints and codes, using unregistered cell phones. Voice messages, particularly in local dialects, are safer than text messages, which can be monitored by Chinese security

agents. The two monks don't share information about their sources, even with each other. "When we contact Tibetans inside Tibet, we're putting their lives at risk," Tsering explained.

Tsering and Yeshe often have difficulty collating the piecemeal information they receive. On February 4th, Tsering received a message from a Tibetan in exile. The man had heard that someone had set himself on fire near Taktsa Monastery, in Sichuan, and that the body had been taken to the monastery, but he had no further details. A day later, another monk came to Tsering's office and told him he had heard that a Kirti monk named Lobsang Namgyal had self-immolated, but he didn't know precisely where or when. For more than a week, Tsering and Yeshe tried to turn ambiguous hints into a coherent account, until Tsering heard from a reliable source who confirmed that the man who self-immolated was indeed Namgyal. He had set himself alight at six in the morning in front of a police station. It was the hundredth self-immolation in Tibet.

Namgyal's death was particularly upsetting for Tsering and Yeshe, who both knew him from their days at Kirti Monastery. He had been two classes ahead of Tsering and sat across from Yeshe during prayers. Tsering remembers Namgyal as "a very simple monk, very practical," always fingering his prayer beads. He was not an outstanding student, but he was regarded as disciplined and reliable. The monks heard that things had gone badly for Namgyal in the past year. In September, he disappeared for two weeks; it turned out that he had been in jail. Police spread word in the monastery that he had been caught consorting with prostitutes. Namgyal quietly told a few fellow-monks that this wasn't true, that he had been interrogated about a relative living in Australia but had refused to speak. Some monks believed his account, Tsering says, but could not openly defend him. Others in the monastery, who didn't know the full story, began harassing Namgyal for not being a "pure monk." He felt humiliated and pressured, and eventually left the monastery. "He had nothing left but to set himself on fire," Tsering said.

I first met Tsering last summer. In his tiny monk's cell, which until recently doubled as his office, he sat cross-legged on a Tibetan carpet with a dragon

motif. He juggled smartphones and SIM cards, surfed Web sites, and organized files on a Samsung computer. He was friendly and talkative, and I learned that he was renowned among the monks as a soccer fanatic—Chelsea is his team—and that he once circumvented the monastery's strict rationing of television by tapping into the main cable line to watch matches. When I saw Tsering again this year, he seemed more oppressed by his work. As we discussed the burnings, he rubbed the bridge of his nose and sometimes clasped his hands over his ears as if his head might explode. His friends told me that he was suffering from depression. He said that he no longer had time to watch soccer, and that he had migraines and high blood pressure. He had been to the hospital to get checked for chest pains, and one doctor advised him to change jobs. To Tsering, that was inconceivable, because so many people relied on him for information about protests inside Tibet. "We have this responsibility," Tsering said. "We can't shrug it off our shoulders."

Tsering obtained permission for me to spend a night at the monastery, and I stayed in his cell with him. The room, secured by a brown steel door with a large sliding bolt, was big enough for a mattress on a wooden platform, a metal wardrobe, two knee-high tables, and a two-burner gas stove. Small bookshelves were built into the walls. There was a

photograph of Tsering's father, mother, and three younger brothers propped on a ledge. It was a season of bone-chilling rains, but Tsering kept his window open to get fresh air. He put his mattress on the floor and offered me the wooden platform for my sleeping bag. As night fell, we could hear the patter of footsteps in the hallways, yelping dogs in the distance, a monk chanting evening prayers, metal pots being washed, and someone spitting into a communal sink. Shortly before turning in, Tsering read a message on his white iPhone and told me, "Tonight, one Tibetan self-immolated in Tibet."

The immolations have placed exiled Tibetan leaders in an awkward position: they must pay their respects to the self-immolators without being seen to have encouraged them. Lobsang Sangay, the leader of the government-in-exile, has called for the protests to stop, while also saying it's a "sacred duty" to honor the self-immolators. Senior lamas have mourned the loss of life, but still extoll the selfless virtues of Tibetans who give their lives to a larger purpose. "We don't encourage people to self-immolate," Kirti Rinpoche told me. "But it's obvious that they have sacrificed for the Tibetan cause, and it's our responsibility to give voice to what they have done."

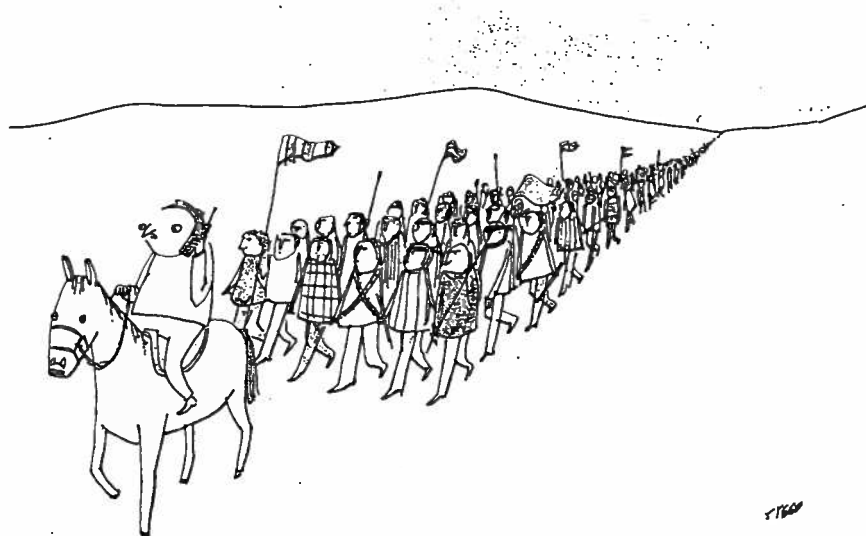
No one is more ambivalent than the Dalai Lama. Regarded by Tibetans as the embodiment of the Buddha of Com-

passion, he is a deeply committed pacifist. When the first Tibetan self-immolation occurred—in India, a decade before the current protests—the Dalai Lama visited the dying man in the hospital. Whispering through the gauze wrapped around the man's head, the Dalai Lama said, "Do not pass over with hatred for the Chinese in your heart."

During the recent wave of immolations, the Dalai Lama has avoided taking a clear stand, but many people close to him feel certain that he wants them to stop. Jeffrey Hopkins, a Tibetologist at the University of Virginia, told me, "There is no doubt he would counsel anyone not to feel hatred." In an interview with NBC in October, the Dalai Lama said that it was difficult to judge the sacrifices: they could be seen as positive if they were done for the "well-being of the people," but they were wrong if "carried out with full anger and hatred." He worries that the Chinese regime will take advantage of any statement he makes. "If he calls on them to stop, and they stop, what will the Chinese say?" one of his aides asked me. "They'll say, 'The whole time the Dalai Lama was behind it!'"

The Chinese government and its supporters have argued that suicide violates Buddhist principles of nonviolence. "No killing is the first precept of Buddhism and must never be violated," the Chinese Tibetologist Li Decheng wrote in the *People's Daily*, the official newspaper of the Chinese Communist Party. Tibetans tend to dismiss this line of argument as disingenuous. Several Buddhist scholars told me that the deaths were, generally speaking, a sacrifice for a higher cause, and should be viewed as different from violence against others or from suicides committed out of personal despair. Lhakdor, a monk who heads the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives in Dharamsala, said that it was important not to confuse "nonviolence with the absence of violence." He gave the example of a mother jumping into a pit of fire to save her child as an act of pure compassion. Seen in this light, he said, sacrificing your life for the benefit of others is "not a contradiction, because your life is precious in saving others."

The exiled Tibetan writer Jamyang Norbu has written of the need for "an action-oriented tradition of Buddhism," in contrast to what he sees as a "quietist,



"I'm returning home triumphant—do you need me to pick anything up?"

passive, even escapist perception of Buddhism which has gained more widespread acceptance, especially in the West." Norbu recounted a story from Buddhist scripture in which the Buddha, in an incarnation before his enlightenment, killed a man who was planning a mass murder, thereby saving the lives of hundreds of innocents. Another story describes how the future Buddha came across a starving tigress and her newborn cubs. In an act of supreme compassion, he found a sharp piece of wood, cut himself open, and fed himself to the famished mother. Today, a monastery about forty kilometres outside Kathmandu marks the spot where this is believed to have happened. It's a popular pilgrimage site, at which people leave offerings of money and food, hang prayer flags, and light butter lamps.

Analysts trying to explain the recent upsurge of immolations point to various possible influences. In addition to Buddhist stories of self-sacrifice, there is the famous example of Thich Quang Duc, the Vietnamese monk who set himself alight in Saigon in 1963, and the more recent case of Mohamed Bouazizi, the Tunisian street vender whose self-immolation gave rise to the Arab Spring. Neither of these explanations seems quite adequate: Tibetan protests began before Bouazizi killed himself, and the Vietnamese example is not well known in Tibet. Robert Barnett told me that he thought one inspiration for the acts might, in fact, be Chinese. "Modern Chinese politics is all about models who die for the party or the nation," he said. "It's a culture where martyrdom is seen as the highest political value." In "Red River Valley," a popular Chinese film set during the British occupation of Tibet in 1904, a Tibetan hero lights a spreading pool of fuel to kill himself and his enemies. The film was released in 1997 and was shown widely in Tibet, as part of a policy of identifying China's struggle against Western countries with the region's earlier suffering at the hands of the British.

Several Tibetan self-immolators have left written statements explaining their actions. Many demand freedom, including religious freedom and the protection of Tibetan culture and language; others call more specifically for independence. The most common sentiment is an appeal for the Dalai Lama's return to Tibet.

Nangdrol, an eighteen-year-old who self-immolated in February, 2012, wrote, "My requests to the Tibetans are: Be United, Be Tibetan, Dress Tibetan, and Speak Tibetan." Sonam Wangyal, the highest-ranking monk to have immolated himself, declared, "I am giving away my body as an offering of light to chase away the darkness, to free all beings from suffering, and to lead them—each of whom has been our mother in the past and yet has been led by ignorance to commit immoral acts—to the Amitabha, the Buddha of infinite light."

When Tsering Tashi set himself on fire, his aunt, Tsering Kyi, was asleep in her apartment, in Washington, D.C. She had escaped from Tibet in 1999, when she was sixteen, walking for nearly a month through Himalayan mountain passes into Nepal, and came to the United States a decade later. She now hosts television and radio programs for Voice of America, including one called "Cyber Tibet," which explores Tibetan political and cultural news on the Web.

At around seven o'clock in the morning, her iPhone started to vibrate, and when she answered it all she could hear was a background clamor of cries and prayers in her dialect of Tibetan. Kyi called an elderly friend from her village. "Your brother's son has passed away," the man said. "He set fire to himself around two-thirty, and just burned to ash."

Her first reaction was fury at her nephew. He was his parents' only son, and the family was devastated. Kyi had spoken on the phone with him only a few days before. He had playfully berated her for the way she dressed on Voice of America television broadcasts. "Why are you always wearing the same *chuba*?" he said. "You don't have any other Tibetan dress?" She told him that it was difficult to get Tibetan clothing in the United States: "If you have time, maybe you can bring me one!"

A few hours after learning of Tashi's death, Kyi reached his father. "He couldn't talk much. So many people were coming to offer condolences," she recalled later. Yet he tried to console her. "Why are you crying?" he said. "So many people die in accidents, so many die of sickness. But my son has not died without reason."

Later that day, someone sent her the

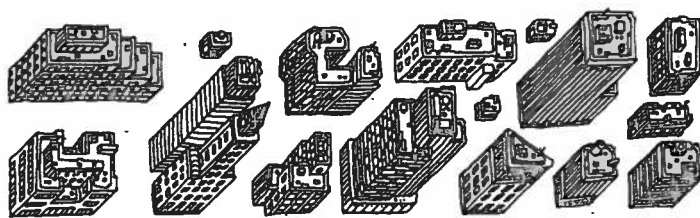
short video clip of Tashi's last moments. Watching the footage of him folding his arms in prayer, she started to respect his fortitude. "That is a really, really strong image," she said. "He is suffering death by putting his whole body on fire, and he's still calling out His Holiness the Dalai Lama's name."

Beyond that, Tashi left no statement. Kyi suspects that Tashi's final act was a response to the restrictions placed on Tibetan farmers and herders, the mining of Tibet's mineral-rich land, the influx of Han Chinese. She also thinks that he may have been inspired by an ancestor, Tenpa Yarko, who, in 1958, led a local rebellion against Communist Chinese forces and shot himself rather than surrender. Yarko's relatives came to regard him as a family deity. "We pray to him," Kyi said. "If I talk about these things to a Westerner, it sounds like an ancient story. But it's a reality."

After Tashi died, Kyi told me, Chinese security forces set up roadblocks at the three entrances to his village, but local people still found ways in. A few monks came and chanted prayers, defying Chinese orders to stay away. Normally, a body must be kept for several days while astrological charts are consulted and special prayers conducted—to soothe the lingering spirit and insure a good rebirth. But Chinese officials put pressure on the leading lama in the area to make sure that Tashi's family removed his body quickly and quietly. The second night, when there were no crowds about, men came to help Tashi's uncle take his body across a nearby river and through the grasslands to a holy mountain. There they lit fires to work by and made preparations for a traditional "sky burial," in which bodies are left for vultures and other scavengers.

Sky burials are still performed in some Tibetan areas where the frozen ground is too hard to dig and where, according to Buddhist precepts, the dead body is regarded as a spent vessel. The spirit of the deceased, it is thought, has already moved on and its progress will be helped by offering wild creatures a meal. The ceremony is called *jhator*, which means "alms for the birds." The men cleaned Tashi's body of ash, cut up the flesh, and broke the bones to facilitate consumption. Then Tashi's remains were strewn about on the sacred peak. ♦

THE CRITICS



BOOKS

PRISON OF THE MIND

A Chinese poet's memoir of incarceration.

BY IAN BURUMA

Spending time in jail is no fun anywhere, but each society has its own cultural refinements of misery. The sadistic imagination of Chinese prison authorities, though hardly unique, is often remarkable. But so is that of the inmates themselves, who form their own hierarchies, their own prisons within prisons.

At the Chongqing Municipal Public Security Bureau Investigation Center, for example, also known as the Song Mountain Investigation Center, the cell bosses devised an exotic menu of tortments. A few samples:

SICHUAN-STYLE SMOKED DUCK: The enforcer burns the inmate's pubic hair, pulls back his foreskin and blackens the head of the penis with fire.

Or:

NOODLES IN A CLEAR BROTH: Strings of toilet papers are soaked in a bowl of urine, and the inmate is forced to eat the toilet paper and drink the urine.

Or:

TURTLE SHELL AND PORK SKIN SOUP: The enforcer smacks the inmate's knee caps until they are bruised and swollen like turtle shells. Walking is impossible.

There are other tortures, too, meted out in a more improvised manner. Liao Yiwu, in his extraordinary prison memoir, "For a Song and a Hundred Songs" (translated from the Chinese by Wenguang Huang; New Harvest), describes the case of a schizophrenic woodcutter who had axed his own wife, because she was so emaciated that he took her for a bundle of wood. The cell boss spikes the woodcutter's broth with a laxative, and

then refuses to let him use the communal toilet bucket, with the result that the desperate man shits all over a fellow-inmate. As a punishment for this disgusting transgression, his face is smashed into a basin. The guards, assuming that he has tried to commit suicide, a prison offense, then work him over with a stun baton.

Alexis de Tocqueville came to the United States in 1831 to study the country's prison system, and ended up writing "Democracy in America." Observing the Chinese prison system from the inside, from 1990 to 1994, as a "counterrevolutionary" inmate, Liao Yiwu tells us a great deal about Chinese society, both traditional and Communist, including the impact of revolutionary rhetoric, forced denunciations and public confessions, and, as times have changed since Mao's misrule, criminal forms of capitalism. He ends his account by saying that "China remains a prison of the mind: prosperity without liberty."

Liao was incarcerated for writing a poem, "Massacre"—a long stream-of-consciousness memorial to the thousands of people who were killed on June 4, 1989, when the pro-democracy movement was crushed throughout China. The poem, in its English translation by Michael Day, begins as follows:

And another sort of massacre takes place
at utopia's core
The Prime Minister catches cold, the
people must cough; martial law
declared
again and again.

The toothless machinery of the state rolls
towards those who have the courage to
resist the sickness.

Liao was not a political activist, or, strictly speaking, a dissident, and his resistance had a spontaneous quality. Politics didn't interest him much, even during the nineteen-eighties, when many young Chinese thought of little else. He led a rather dissolute life, wandering from place to place as a "well-dressed hypocrite, a poet who portrayed himself as a positive role model but all the while breathed in women like I was breathing air, seeking shelter and warmth in random sex."

Like many Chinese who grew up during the Cultural Revolution, Liao was more or less self-educated in literature, although he received a grounding in the Chinese classics from his father, a schoolteacher. His memoir is sprinkled with the names of Western writers—Orwell, Kundera, Proust—some of whose works penetrated even the prison walls in Chongqing. Among them, amazingly, was Orwell's "Nineteen Eighty-Four." In Liao's words, "On the page was an imaginary prison, while all around me was the real thing."

Unlike his friend Liu Xiaobo, a Nobel Prize-winning critic and a writer with strong political convictions, Liao never wished to stick his neck out. He describes himself as an artist who simply wanted to be free to write in any way he liked. As recently as 2011, he told the journalist Ian Johnson, "I don't want to break their laws. I am not interested in them and wish they weren't interested in me." But, in 1989, he put himself "on a self-destructive path" by performing his poem in bars and dance clubs, howling and chanting in the traditional manner of Chinese mourning. A recording of the poem was distributed informally, and a film, entitled "Requiem," was made of his recitation by a group of sympathetic artists and friends. None, according to Liao, could be classified as "dissidents" or "democracy fighters." But they were all arrested, their work confiscated, and thus "the Public Security Bureau destroyed a vibrant underground literary community in Sichuan."

Liao's time in prison didn't turn him into an activist, either. He was approached at one point by a fellow-"89er," who planned to start an organization of

ABOVE: VASCO MOURÃO



"We're having drinks tonight with some people who've eaten with some people who've eaten with that 'Times' food guy."

political prisoners. Liao refused to take part, and explained the reason for his having written "Massacre" in the first place. He "was compelled to protest," he said, because "the state ideology conflicted violently with the poet's right of free expression." To this, he added in his memoir, "I never intended to be a hero, but in a country where insanity ruled, I had to take a stand. 'Massacre' was my art and my art was my protest."

Several famous dissidents have written vividly about their prison experiences. Wei Jingsheng's "The Courage to Stand Alone" is an account of eighteen years spent in prisons after he helped lead the Democracy Wall movement, in the nineteen-seventies. Harry Wu's "Bitter Winds" describes his ordeal in forced-labor camps in the nineteen-sixties and seventies. Their heroic stories bear a strong political message of standing up to dictatorship. Liao is a literary man, and this actually makes his prison memoir even more compelling. For one thing, he is ruthlessly candid about his weaknesses, and his fears. There is nothing especially heroic about him. Watching the guards in combat training on his first day in prison, he "shuddered like a nervous rat." Forced to sing songs over and over again with a parched throat in the freezing cold to entertain the guards,

he is beaten with an electric baton. When he cannot go on any longer, he is stripped and wrestled to the ground: "I could feel the baton on my buttock, but I refused to surrender. The tip of the baton entered me. I screamed and then whimpered in pain like a dog." Liao tried to commit suicide twice, once by bashing his head against the wall. This elicited ridicule from his cellmates, who accused him of playacting, something they thought typical of a bookish poet. If he had really wanted to smash his skull, he should have made sure to use the wall edge.

Liao describes very precisely what it is like to be in constant fear, to live in a cramped cell with so many other men that there is barely room to lie down, and to be starved of proper food, and sex. One ravenous inmate caught a rat, skinned it alive, and ate it raw. Another stuffed his mouth from a bucket of slop. Sex goes on, but in a debased form. A prisoner almost burned his bed down by masturbating to a cigarette lighter that, when lit, showed a picture of a naked woman. And one man got carried away with lust at the sight of a soap-opera star on TV. Liao saw men crowd around a window, the cell boss hoisted onto the shoulders of his slaves, as they jacked off while trying to catch a glimpse of a fe-

male outside. A young man was raped by the cell boss, fell in love with him, and was dismissed with a smack in the face when the boss became impotent.

One of the less creditable reasons we read prison memoirs such as this one with horrified fascination is that the torments of others can have a lurid pornographic appeal. But what makes Liao's work so riveting is his gift for observation. Despite his own suffering, he is endlessly curious about others, their characters, their stories, and how they cope with the terrors of prison life. His encounters with other prisoners are skillfully transformed into short stories. Since some of these men are facing execution, the stories are often about dealing with imminent death. A heroin smuggler nicknamed Dead Chang wants to borrow Liao's atlas in preparation for his next life as a wandering ghost. Dead Chang got lost too many times in his present life, and wishes to visit his favorite haunts after he is dispatched with a bullet to the neck. Being told by this condemned man that they might meet again in the next world, Liao finds that his "limbs were quivering." Dead Chang asks him whether he is O.K., and "let out a sinister laugh. The deep crease between his eyebrows seemed to have opened up like a mouth, ready to swallow me."

Some of the prisoners were featured in another remarkable book by Liao, first published in Taiwan as "Interviews with People from the Bottom Rungs of Society" (2001), and in the U.S. as "The Corpse Walker" (2008). Among them is an illiterate peasant who declared his native village to be an independent monarchy, with himself as the emperor. For this act of counterrevolutionary subversion, he was locked up for life. What fascinates Liao about this "peasant emperor" is that his fantasies are derived from Chinese classics. One of his claims is that a yellow ribbon bearing his imperial name was discovered inside a fish. When Liao points out that this ruse was used by a peasant rebel two thousand years ago to trick people into following him, the emperor tells him to shut up: "It's awfully rude of you to talk to Your Majesty this way. Your Majesty knows that you are a journalist in disguise and have been sent from the hostile kingdom of China. You have attempted to conspire with the

prison authorities to lure me into giving you incriminating evidence."

Literature can serve as an escape, as when Liao drifts into memories of Gabriel García Márquez's *"One Hundred Years of Solitude."* He identifies in particular with one of the characters, Colonel Buendia, who loses his mind after being tied to a chestnut tree for many years. Like the Colonel, Liao retreats into his own mind. At other times, literary works illustrate the most primitive aspects of prison existence. Liao recalls Milan Kundera's definition, in *"The Unbearable Lightness of Being,"* of totalitarian kitsch as "the absolute denial of shit." Liao writes that he cannot raise human feces to a higher level of metaphor: "In this ordinary memoir of mine, shit is shit. I keep mentioning it because I almost drowned in it." This is quite literally true; as a newcomer in a cell, or if he had lost favor with one of the cell bosses, he would have to sleep with his face next to the toilet bucket.

And yet he can't resist using shit metaphorically, as in his statement that he is living "in the shitty pigsty called China." Sickness, too, is elevated to metaphor: "If China were a patient suffering from colon cancer, the city of Chongqing would be the filthy terminus of the colon, a diseased anus." Prison is frequently described in his book as a prison within the giant prison of a diseased Chinese society, a grotesque mirror of the political institutions and rhetoric of the People's Republic of China.

The language of Maoism, now almost as ingrained in Chinese life as Confucian maxims once were, and often used in a similar way, crops up again and again in prison conversations. Inmates sometimes use Mao's dictums sarcastically, as when the unfortunate woodcutter, after having imbibed the laxative, is prevented from getting to the toilet bucket: "Without discipline and rules," they taunt him, "revolution will not succeed." Sometimes Mao is quoted in earnest. A cell boss who is sympathetic to Liao warns him against cultivating the friendship of a fellow-intellectual: "Don't be too bookish. . . . Remember what Chairman Mao said about class struggles—never let your guard down against your class enemy."

Quite apart from Maoist sentiments, it is the Chinese system of government

that is replicated inside the prison. This owes something to Leninist Party organization, but a great deal to more traditional practices as well. When Liao first enters the Song Mountain Investigation Center, his cell boss explains how things work. He likens the cell hierarchy to the Politburo and the Central Military Commission, whose members are above the common people. They can do anything they please. But, to maintain order, they must impose absolute unity in the cell. The first sign of rebellion will be crushed without mercy. However, the boss says, echoing centuries of Confucian doctrine, the rulers cannot be too harsh: "We need to let the people beneath us feel that we are like their parents." When Liao objects, quoting Chairman Mao's saying that the people are the parents of the Party, the boss shows a better understanding of Chinese reality: "That's goddamned nonsense! If a thief here wishes to have a nice filling meal, it's up to me to decide."

Not surprisingly, the prison authorities also model their methods on common practices in the People's Republic. The use of political campaigns, for example. Inmates at the Investigation Center were forced to take part in an annual campaign called "Confess Your Own Crimes and Report on Others." Formal rallies were held in the courtyard, just as in Maoist times, with much chanting of political slogans and long speeches made by police and prison officials. Many hours were devoted to writing confessions and denunciations. Cell bosses were encouraged to pick the juiciest items from their menu of torments for those whose keenness to confess or tell on others was judged to be inadequate.

This tactic, too, is a toxic combination of tradition and modern innovation. Ritual confession was always part of Confucian justice. Being forced to report on others, though hardly unknown in the past, is a totalitarian refinement designed to break all trust among people, so that their only loyalty will be to the Party. Liao writes that confess-and-report campaigns were so rough that several people died under torture. When things threatened to get seriously out of hand, however, the authorities would call a halt to the proceedings, and, in the usual Maoist fashion, turn the tables on the perpetrators by starting another campaign, this time one called "Crack Down

on Prison Bullies." The very people who had been encouraged to "break" recalcitrant prisoners were now broken in turn.

But, of course, China has moved on since Mao's decades of terror. When Liao was in prison, China's door had already been open to business with the capitalist world for more than ten years. Economic reforms began in the early nineteen-eighties, under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping. In 1992, Deng called for even faster economic growth. As a result, in Liao's words, "prison personnel never missed a beat and were quick to take advantage of the free labor to fatten their wallets."

Free labor is a polite phrase for slavery. Each prisoner was required to spend at least ten hours a day putting together medicine packets, while being subjected to political exhortations from loudspeakers—the usual Chinese Communist mixture of ideological bullying and economic exploitation. Liao remarks that this type of repetitive manual work had already been abandoned by local factories. But prison authorities could make tidy profits by whipping the incarcerated slaves into reaching quotas of up to three thousand packets a day. Inmates who tried to escape or who resisted the prison regimen would be beaten up or thrown into "dark cells" that were just big enough to crawl into and lie down. "After a year or so," Liao writes, "the dark-cell-dweller's skin turned pale, his bones fragile, and his hair white as frost. The skin became so transparent that one could see the blue veins."

Liao mentions a few moments of respite. There were instances of kindness from cell bosses who favored him, sometimes for being a poet; respect for the written word is not dead in China. A Buddhist monk taught him to play the flute. And, once in a while, conditions improved a little because of foreign pressure on China to do better on human rights. This should make those of us who had given up all hope of influencing official Chinese behavior from the outside a little less cynical.

Meanwhile, Liao tried to keep his memories of what he had heard and seen in prison by scribbling tiny notes in a copy of the classic Chinese novel *"Romance of the Three Kingdoms."* On January 31, 1994, he was freed. But, in his account, his release was only the beginning of a different type of ordeal, perhaps more bit-

ter in its way. Troublemakers and dissidents are rarely popular in oppressive societies. They cause problems for others by provoking reprisals, and they make the majority of people who refuse to rebel feel uneasy about their conformity. Liao dreaded going home for the New Year and other family celebrations, because he knew that he would be criticized. His wife decided to divorce him—perhaps not surprising, as Liao never claims to have been a devoted husband. Worse was his abandonment by old friends. After four years of jail, he writes, “I was no more than a pile of dog shit to my fellow writers.” This rejection might suggest a peculiarly Chinese form of callousness, but it actually has more to do with how China is now run. After the failed rebellion of 1989, the Communist government made a clever deal with the educated classes: if members of the urban elite would stay out of politics, they would have the freedom to enrich themselves. “Our whole country was suddenly busy making money, which was a corrosive acid that dissolved political dissent,” Liao writes. “The same people who used to march fearlessly in the street for democracy now have become ‘apolitical’ in the current era of rampant materialism—Communist style.” Several of his former artistic comrades had become businessmen.

In such circumstances, the normal human tendency to shun troublemakers is strengthened by the irrepressible consciousness of having made a shabby deal. Liao’s keenest readers, as is so often the case with people living under dictatorship, were the officials who were paid to censor his words. Reduced to life as an educated vagabond, sometimes playing his flute in the streets to survive, and terrified of being sent to jail again, Liao managed to cross the border into Vietnam; from there, he made his way to Germany, where he now lives. And so it is that this immensely gifted Chinese writer performs his poetic acts of mourning for the entertainment of audiences in Berlin and New York—an exotic “dissident” abroad, his voice to be heard everywhere except where it is most needed. ♦

THE FINANCIAL PAGE THE PAY IS TOO DAMN LOW

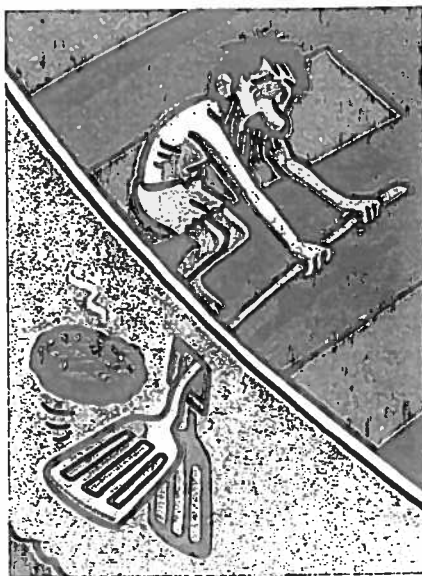
A few weeks ago, Washington, D.C., passed a living-wage bill designed to make Walmart pay its workers a minimum of \$12.50 an hour. Then President Obama called on Congress to raise the federal minimum wage (which is currently \$7.25 an hour). McDonald's was widely derided for releasing a budget to help its employees plan financially, since that only underscored how brutally hard it is to live on a McDonald's wage. And last week fast-food workers across the country staged walkouts, calling for an increase in their pay to fifteen dollars an hour. Low-wage earners have long been the hardest workers to organize and the easiest to ignore. Now they're front-page news.

The workers' grievances are simple: low wages, few (if any) benefits, and little full-time work. In inflation-adjusted terms, the minimum wage, though higher than it was a decade ago, is still well below its 1968 peak (when it was worth about \$10.70 an hour in today's dollars), and it's still poverty-level pay. To make matters worse, most fast-food and retail work is part time, and the weak job market has eroded what little bargaining power low-wage workers had: their earnings actually fell between 2009 and last year, according to the National Employment Law Project.

Still, the reason this has become a big political issue is not that the jobs have changed; it's that the people doing the jobs have. Historically, low-wage work tended to be done either by the young or by women looking for part-time jobs to supplement family income. As the historian Bethany Moreton has shown, Walmart in its early days sought explicitly to hire underemployed married women. Fast-food workforces, meanwhile, were dominated by teen-agers. Now, though, plenty of family breadwinners are stuck in these jobs. That's because, over the past three decades, the U.S. economy has done a poor job of creating good middle-class jobs; five of the six fastest-growing job categories today pay less than the median wage. That's why, as a recent study by the economists John Schmitt and Janelle Jones has shown, low-wage workers are

older and better educated than ever. More important, more of them are relying on their paychecks not for pin money or to pay for Friday-night dates but, rather, to support families. Forty years ago, there was no expectation that fast-food or discount-retail jobs would provide a living wage, because these were not jobs that, in the main, adult heads of household did. Today, low-wage workers provide forty-six per cent of their family's income. It is that change which is driving the demand for higher pay.

The situation is the result of a tectonic shift in the American economy. In 1960, the country's biggest employer, General Motors, was also its most profitable company and one of its best-paying. It had



high profit margins and real pricing power, even as it was paying its workers union wages. And it was not alone: firms like Ford, Standard Oil, and Bethlehem Steel employed huge numbers of well-paid workers while earning big profits. Today, the country's biggest employers are retailers and fast-food chains, almost all of which have built their businesses on low pay—they've striven to keep wages down and unions out—and low prices.

This complicates things, in part because of the nature of these businesses. They make plenty of money, but most have slim profit margins: Walmart and Target earn between three and four cents on the dollar; a typical McDonald's franchise restaurant earns around six cents on the dollar before taxes, according to an

analysis from Janney Capital Markets. In fact, the combined profits of all the major retailers, restaurant chains, and supermarkets in the Fortune 500 are smaller than the profits of Apple alone. Yet Apple employs just seventy-six thousand people, while the retailers, supermarkets, and restaurant chains employ 5.6 million. The grim truth of those numbers is that low wages are a big part of why these companies are able to stay profitable while offering low prices. Congress is currently considering a bill increasing the minimum wage to \$10.10 over the next three years. That's an increase that the companies can easily tolerate, and it would make a significant difference in the lives of low-wage workers. But that's still a long way from turning these jobs into the kind of employment that can support a middle-class family. If you want to accomplish that, you have to change the entire way these companies do business. Above all, you have to get consumers to accept significantly higher, and steadily rising, prices. After decades in which we've grown used to cheap stuff, that won't be easy.

Realistically, then, a higher minimum wage can be only part of the solution. We also need to expand the earned-income tax credit, and strengthen the social-insurance system, including child care and health care (the advent of Obamacare will help in this regard). Fast-food jobs in Germany and the Netherlands aren't much better-paid than in the U.S., but a stronger safety net makes workers much better off. We also need many more of the "middle-class jobs" we're always hearing about. A recent McKinsey report suggested that the government should invest almost a trillion dollars over the next five years in repairing and upgrading the national infrastructure, which seems like a good place to start. And we really need the economy as a whole to grow faster, because that would both increase the supply of good jobs and improve the bargaining power of low-wage workers. As Jared Bernstein, an economist at the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities, told me, "The best friend that low-wage workers have is a strong economy and a tight job market." It isn't enough to make bad jobs better. We need to create better jobs.

—James Surowiecki

THURSDAY, AUG 29, 2013 11:44 AM UTC

Largest fast food strike ever today: 58 cities will be affected

Work stoppage will hit about a thousand shops and several cities in the south today, as workers seek fair wages

BY JOSH EIDELSON



Demonstrators supporting fast food workers protest outside a McDonald's, July 29, 2013, in New York's Union Square. (Credit: AP/John Minchillo)

Fast food workers today plan to mount one-day walkouts against nearly a thousand stores in over fifty cities — the largest-ever mobilization against their growing, low-wage, non-union industry, which until last fall had never faced a substantial U.S. strike. The work stoppage comes four weeks after a four-day, seven-city strike wave in which organizers say thousands walked off the job.

Today, the strikes — which started with a single-city November work stoppage in New York — are expected to hit several cities. In each city — from Los Angeles to Peoria — workers are demanding a raise to \$15 an hour, and the chance to form a union without intimidation by their boss.

"I'm not a kid," Raleigh, North Carolina, Little Caesar's worker

Julio Wilson told Salon. Rather, he said, "I am a single father, I have a daughter with special needs that needs attending to on a daily basis." He said many of his co-workers and their families "need to be compensated to be able to live."

Wilson, 34, first learned about the campaign when he saw a striking New York workers on TV. "They kind of sparked my interest," he said, and led him to search online for a local organization tied to the cause. Over the past eight years, he's worked at Burger King, Subway, Arby's and McDonald's. "I've made my way through the fast food circuit," said Wilson, "and they're all the same."

Asked about the coming strike, McDonald's e-mailed, "The story promoted by the individuals organizing these events

does not provide an accurate picture of what it means to work at McDonald's." The company said it "aims to offer competitive pay and benefits to our employees" and that "Our history is full of examples of individuals who worked their first job with McDonald's and went on to successful careers both within and outside of McDonald's." A recent study by the pro-labor National Employment Law Project found that "only 2.2 percent of jobs in the fast food industry are managerial, professional, or technical occupations," and that the average pay for a front-line fast food worker is \$8.94 per hour.

As Salon has reported, the key player behind the campaign is the Service Employees International Union, which has partnered with local faith, labor and community groups in an effort to transform an industry whose conditions increasingly characterize U.S. work. Like a growing number of U.S. workers, fast food employees make poverty wages, face erratic schedules and unstable employment and are paid to perform a friendly personality ("emotional labor") while working at a pace some blame for on-the-job burns.

Like their counterparts cleaning corporate offices or hauling goods in Walmart warehouses, they face a "Who's the Boss" problem that renders New Deal labor law less and less relevant: The companies that legally employ them (individual fast food restaurant franchisees, who may own a handful of stores) aren't the ones with the greatest sway over their working conditions. That would be giant corporations like McDonald's, which brought in \$5.5 billion in profit in 2011, and takes about a seventh of franchised stores' revenue in rent and fees.

Big Macs are big business, and an ever-bigger part of our economy. "This is where people go when [manufacturing] plants go, when we have layoffs in the public sectors – these are where adults go to work," said Kate Bronfenbrenner, who directs labor education and research at Cornell. Indeed, the top three occupations measured by the Bureau of Labor Statistics are all jobs found in fast food or retail (in some cities, retail workers will join today's strikes as well).

But these strikes' significance extends beyond fast food. A white paper released last week by the Economic Policy Institute found that "the vast majority of U.S. workers – including white-collar and blue-collar workers and those with and without a college degree – have endured more than a decade of wage stagnation." In other words, despite increased productivity and profits, so-called "unskilled" workers aren't the only ones treading water.

"If you go back to the nineteenth century, manufacturing jobs sucked," said John Schmitt, a senior economist at the progressive Center for Economic and Policy Research. Contrary to the myth that lower wages for service work were simply "preordained," argued Schmitt, "the problem over the last thirty or forty years in terms of the economy is the declining bargaining power for workers. And the question is, how do we reconstruct bargaining power for workers?"

That's what the organizers of today's strike are out to do. While workers say they've already achieved some incremental store-specific victories – from scheduling changes, to raises, to the restoration of a tip jar – it's too soon to say if they'll succeed. But they're already drawing near-unparalleled attention from local and national media – and within organized labor. Though identified primarily with SEIU, which isn't in the AFL-CIO, the fast food campaign gets frequent mention in a July report to the AFL-CIO executive council summarizing the pre-convention conversations that federation has been holding across the country.

Among the aspects of the strikers' strategy: an attack on all the companies in the industry, executed in collaboration among a range of progressive groups, including political, media, consumer, and legal angles, all anchored by one-day strikes designed to maximize impact and minimize risk – most of them carried out by a minority of a store's workforce, with less focus on shutting down business than on embarrassing corporations and engaging co-workers and the larger public.

"At first, I was nervous," said Chicago Subway employee Felix Mendez, who'll be striking for the third time today. Still, he told Salon he took the lead in getting all of his three co-workers to participate in the prior strikes, shutting down their store. "If we just sit back and do nothing about it," he recalled telling them, "we're never going to get what

we want.” Mendez said he makes \$8.25 an hour after working at Subway for three years. “Before, I wasn’t really too serious about anything...” said Mendez. “I have changed a whole lot since I’ve been part of this union.”

“Workers have really taken charge,” said Rev. Martin Rafanan, the community director for STL Can’t Survive on \$7.35, the St. Louis fast food effort. “They’ve called for this strike because it’s an opportunity to continue to expand their numbers and expand their geography.” He expressed hope that today’s strike would “make a big splash in terms of folks beginning to see this as a national movement.” Rafanan, who co-chairs the workers rights board of the Missouri chapter of the labor-community group Jobs with Justice, said last week that about 200 St. Louis fast food workers were involved in organizing towards the strike. He told Salon that, beyond the sites where workers and others have been furiously organizing in recent weeks, “there’s a good chance” of workers in other stores or cities walking off the job today without any prior contact with the campaign.

Where will it all lead? A source present at a meeting SEIU held earlier this month with allies told Salon that potential strategies under discussion included a campaign for state referenda to allow cities to raise fast food wages, and a push for top burger corporations to jointly agree to eat the cost of increased labor costs. Asked whether the efforts could end in a deal in which corporations accept union negotiations and the union agrees before formal bargaining to cap new labor costs or carve out certain regions, SEIU strategist Scott Courtney answered, “It could be something like that.” SEIU President Mary Kay Henry said, “I think anything you know about traditional collective bargaining is possible, and then things we haven’t imagined.”

Asked about such a scenario, Rafanan said, “I’m for any tactic or strategy at this point which can move us forward, all right? And there are a lot of us, people have been discussing these things, a variety of these things. But where I’m standing, I’m a community ally, so my goal is to stand with workers. I believe that workers should make decisions about how they’re going to organize their industry.”

As an example of effective collective action, Rafanan related how the campaign had beaten back alleged retaliation against a St. Louis striker earlier this month. According to Rafanan, when workers returned from the work stoppage, a Popeyes manager fired one of them and “was very adamant that the person would not get their job back.” In response, activists “blocked the drive-through and had taken over the counter,” drawing several police cars. Before the situation escalated to arrests, said Rafanan, the franchisee owner arrived and, after a conversation with a local councilmember on the scene to support the workers, agreed to reinstate the employee. “This is the kind of thing we feel we can do when we don’t get a response,” said Rafanan.

Cornell’s Bronfenbrenner argued that having community allies escort workers back to work to ward off post-strike retaliation was the campaign’s most important innovation, and a testament to the deep community ties the campaign had built. “As long as they can keep the bosses from beating them down by having the eyes of the world always on them, keep the campaign in the sunshine,” she said, “they have a chance.” Because a national fast food corporation could simply cut off the franchise contract of any local store owner who started bargaining collectively with workers, noted Bronfenbrenner, winning unionization would require compelling corporations to forswear union-busting. “So it’s either going to be big,” she said, “or it’s not going to happen.”

Sociologist Stanley Aronowitz, who directs the Center for the Study of Culture, Technology and Work at the City University of New York, credited the campaign with “putting tremendous pressure, good pressure, on the fast food chains to raise their wages.” But he expressed concern that SEIU would be too quick to make a deal with corporations restricting future strikes. “They have gotten this far because they have taken direct action, and they have expanded their direct action efforts,” Aronowitz told Salon. “If they decide to settle down prematurely, I think they will duplicate what happened to the United Auto Workers, and what’s happened to the public employees unions, which is basically that they’re put permanently on the defensive.”

Today's strike comes one day after the fiftieth anniversary of the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. According to Rev. Rafanan, St. Louis strikers will honor the march, and a subsequent local protest in which civil rights activists chained themselves to the Jefferson Bank, by participating in a civil disobedience training this afternoon. Asked if that means we'll see more fast food workers mounting civil disobedience, Rafanan said, "Certainly that's where we're ramping up to."

Julio Wilson said the march's anniversary "ties in perfectly" with the strikes' spread south. Wilson told Salon the example of Martin Luther King "has inspired me personally to stand up for what I believe in, and that's exactly what I'm going to do." Asked how many of his Raleigh store's twenty employees would join the first-of-its-kind strike, he answered, "Hopefully all of them."

Josh Eidelson

McDonald's Sample Budget Sheet Is Laughable, but Its Implications Are Not

By Minyanville, July 27, 2013, 12:00:00 PM EDT
Vote up

For McDonald's (MCD) and Visa (V) , what may have been a well-intentioned online financial education tool for McDonald's employees has provoked outrage and satire, just as the fast food company is coming under pressure to raise wages.

The so-called *Practical Money Skills Budget Journal* , a downloadable financial management guide dating back to 2010, has been met with ridicule since it was discovered by writers at Slate and ThinkProgress earlier this month.

With waves of fast food employees striking across the nation since last fall, asking for wages of \$15 per hour, rather than the industry standard of minimum wage, the educational efforts of McDonald's do little more than highlight the fact that its employees likely can't survive off of one job alone.

Given the recent media uproar, low-wage workers in New York City , Chicago, Detroit, Milwaukee , St. Louis, Flint, and Kansas City will have plenty of ammunition to work with when they abandon their posts on July 29 in the continued push against unfair employment practices, though the legitimacy of these strikes is questioned by some.

"The negative reaction to McDonald's sample budget and the recent strike activity are mostly media events. The majority of the people participating in the protests are activists paid by the unions to be there," Phillip Wilson, president of the Labor Relations Institute, a consulting firm that helps companies bust unions, tells Minyanville.

Here's the actual budget sample as it appeared on the McDonald's Practical Money Skills Site Budget Journal prior to a hasty edit on July 16 by McDonald's:

Sample Monthly Budget

Monthly Net Income

Income (1st job)	\$ 1,105
Income (2nd job)	\$ 955
Other Income	\$ 0
Monthly Net Income Total	\$ 2,060

Monthly Expenses

Savings	\$ 100
Mortgage/Rent	\$ 600
Car Payment	\$ 150
Car/Home Insurance	\$ 100
Health Insurance	\$ 20
Heating	\$ 0
Cable/Phone	\$ 100
Electric	\$ 90
Other	\$ 100
Monthly Expenses Total	\$ 1,260

Monthly Spending Money

(Monthly Net Income Total minus Monthly Expenses Total)

Daily Spending Money Goal

(Monthly Spending Money divided by 30)*

The edited budget allots \$50 rather than \$0 to heating, but curiously enough, the Spanish-language sample only allots \$30 to heating. Payments for groceries, gas, clothing, and possible childcare expenses are also not accounted for.

With a \$20 cap for health insurance, an implied reality that a McDonald's employee should be working two jobs to get by, and a downright insulting informational video reminder that by not buying a \$1 snack every day for 365 days, savings amount to \$365, the jokes almost write themselves.

Stephen Colbert, the host of *The Colbert Report*, jumped at the opportunity to poke fun at the company's blunder. On his show Monday, he hunched over a calculator and mumbled as he confirmed the budget's math.

"I've said it before -- 'minimum' is a misnomer," he quipped. "\$7.25? I can think of wages a lot

lower: \$3.28, \$1.19, a pat on the back, and a handful of mints."

Click below to watch Colbert's seven-minute thrashing of McDonald's and its "McNuggets of McWisdom."

To make matters worse, on the same site as the budget information is a discussion of the "benefits" of McDonald's paying employees via special Visa debit cards , rather than paper checks.

The Golden Arches flaunts the easy accessibility of cash on a PayCHEK Plus! card and the ease with which employees can be paid instantly without without coming in to the restaurant to pick up a check. McDonald's has been offering the cards as a payment option since 2012 and in most locations, but a recent lawsuit suggests that this payment method harms employees.

The Visa paycards used to compensate employees charge \$1.75 withdrawal fees, \$0.75 to check the account balance, and \$5-per-month inactivity fees, all further cutting into the already sparse income of McDonald's workers.

It may be easier to digest this kind of information when it's delivered in a humorous form, but fortunately, any kind of coverage means additional exposure for the troubled fast food employee. Marriage equality and marijuana legalization are just some topics seeing legal progress thanks in part to the buzz created by their constant presence in the news. The momentum of nationwide strikes could make minimum wage the next major issue to receive public attention and support.

Although headlines across the Internet point solely to McDonald's due to the need for specificity, employees at **Burger King** (BKW), **Wendy's** (WEN), **Yum Brands** (YUM) restaurants, and even fast-casual chains like **Chipotle** (CMG) are in similarly dire financial situations.

"The truth is, millions of fast food workers will never have an opportunity to move beyond front line jobs. That's why it's so critical that instead of empty promises of future possibilities, the industry acts to ensure that the jobs most fast food workers occupy provide the wages and benefits workers need to support themselves and their families," said Christine Owens, executive director of the National Employment Law Project, in a statement.

Minimum wage is, admittedly, part of the reason that fast food companies are able to branch out on a massive scale. Additionally, given the high supply of willing workers for the relatively low-skilled positions, there is little economic incentive for the companies to raise wages.

Should employees manage to secure higher wages, fast food chains will need to adopt a new strategy for minimizing costs.

Read more: <http://www.nasdaq.com/article/mcdonalds-sample-budget-sheet-is-laughable-but-its-implications-are-not-cm261920#ixzz2e1qrQ4ZU>

