Q&A on 9/23 Justice at Hershey’s March

What is the 9/23 march all about?

In the six weeks since hundreds of J-1 student workers went on strike to end exploitation at the Hershey’s packing plant, Hershey’s has refused to come to the table to discuss the students’ demands, including the demand that Hershey’s create 400 living wage jobs for local workers.

Hershey’s seemed to hope that when the students returned to their home countries at the end of the summer, the pressure would end. Instead, the students organized hundreds of local workers and labor leaders into a growing fight for living wage jobs. Friday’s 1,000-person march in Hershey (Sep. 23 at 12:45 p.m., Homestead Rd. and Chocolate Ave. (Rt. 422), Hershey, PA) is just the start of that fight.

What are the students’ demands?

1) Return the $3,000-6,000 each student paid for a cultural exchange program they never receive, and 2) turn the 400 jobs the students filled in the Hershey’s packing plant into living wage jobs for local workers.

If these jobs had been living wage jobs under a union contract—which they were before Hershey’s chose to subcontract them out to the cheapest possible workers—400 workers in Central Pennsylvania could have made at least $18 an hour. That’s $15 million last year alone that Hershey’s has an obligation to return to Central Pennsylvania’s economy.

How did these students get here?

This summer, 400 students paid $3,000-6,000 each to come to the U.S. on the State Department’s J-1 cultural exchange visa program, primarily expecting a cultural exchange. Instead they became captive workers at Hershey’s packing plant, facing deeply exploitative conditions. After mandatory deductions, they made as little as $1-3 an hour. They were routinely driven to work past their physical limits. When students raised concerns to their sponsor or supervisors, they were met with threats of deportation.

How did the strike happen?

The students organized and became members of the National Guestworker Alliance, a national organization that fights for the dignity of all workers. With support from Central PA residents and organized labor, the students held a walk-out and strike from the Hershey’s plant on Aug. 17.

How has Hershey’s responded?

Hershey’s has never made a single direct response to any of the students’ demands, and has ignored dozens of requests to talk with the students and their allies. In the days before the 9/23 march, Hershey’s launched a PR campaign to try to discredit the students, and hired Blank Rome Government Relations to lobby Congress on “government affairs issues related to labor practices.”

How have others responded?

Three federal agencies have launched investigations into the exploitation of J-1 student workers at the Hershey’s plant: the State Department, the Department of Labor, and OSHA. Nearly 70,000 Americans have signed a petition in support of the students’ demands, and over a quarter million people have followed the students’ stories on YouTube. Hundreds of supporters in eight cities have rallied in support of the students.

Are the students still here in the U.S.?

Some students have already returned home; others will remain here for several more weeks. But now that hundreds of local PA workers, unemployed residents, and labor leaders have joined the students’ fight against Hershey’s corporate greed and for good jobs, the fight against is only beginning.

Why is this situation urgent right now?

This situation has revealed Hershey’s to be an embodiment of the corporate greed that led to the current jobs crisis in America. The Hershey’s story goes to the heart of the current jobs debate: decades of downsizing, outsourcing, and subcontracting by corporations like Hershey’s has turned countless good jobs—jobs that came with decent pay, rights, respect, and a contract—into sub-minimum wage jobs performed by captive workers.