

The Nation - As Striking Guest Workers Visit NYC Store, McDonald's Says It Has Cut Ties to Their Franchisee
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[Josh Eidelson](#) on March 14, 2013 - 2:11 PM ET

An update, with additional comment from strikers and from McDonald's, appears below.

NEW YORK CITY—Minutes after striking guest workers protested outside a Times Square McDonald's, the company's corporate headquarters announced that it was ending its relationship with the central Pennsylvania franchisee who had employed them.

Just after noon, striker Jorge Victor Rios entered the New York City store with about twenty fellow strikers and supporters to deliver a message to the national chain. As police escorted them out of the building, Rios read, and the crowd repeated, a statement condemning the company's alleged abuses. "American and guest workers, our struggle is the same," the group chanted outside the store. "We demand dignity. We demand respect for all workers. McDonald's must pay."

As *The Nation* [has reported](#), the guest workers came to central Pennsylvania on J-1 visas, which are officially intended for educational exchange. They allege that McDonald's franchisee Andy Cheung required them to work shifts of up to twenty-five hours, refused to pay them for hours they had worked, charged them exorbitant rent for living packed together in basements he owned and threatened to punish them for speaking up. Fifteen workers have been on strike for eight days, working closely with the National Guestworker Alliance labor group.

In a statement e-mailed during the protest, McDonald's announced that Andy Cheung "has agreed to leave the McDonald's system." The company added that it was "also working on connecting with the guest workers on an individual basis to most effectively address this situation," and providing franchisees with information about the J-1 visa program's requirements. The National Guestworker Alliance did not immediately respond to a request for comment regarding the McDonald's announcement.

McDonald's did not immediately respond to a request for further comment regarding the strikers' demands, which include providing full-time work for US employees, disclosing where guest workers are employed in its stores, signing an agreement establishing organizing protections for workers and ensuring that the students are compensated for unpaid wages.

At this afternoon's protest, the striking workers called for CEO Don Thompson to schedule a meeting with them by March 25. Unless he grants a meeting, they plan a daytime mobilization at the company's Chicago headquarters on the 26, and another at Thompson's house that evening. Before Chicago, the strikers will head to Philadelphia, and then to Washington, DC, where they'll meet with legislators to urge stronger labor protections for guest workers as part of immigration reform. The US State Department, which oversees the J-1 program, told *The Nation* Monday that it planned to interview strikers as part of an investigation.

"We talked to our boss, we talked to our sponsor, and we were ignored," striker Rodrigo Yanez said in Spanish following the protest. "This was the only solution we had."

"We came here with the J-1 visa to be in a cultural exchange," striker Luis Fernando Suarez told *The Nation*. "But nothing that they told me is true, because everything is a lie." He called his experience working for Cheung at McDonald's "like an ugly face of the United States... I didn't feel safe." Suarez said that while he had been "a little scared" to go on strike, now "I feel better, because this needed to be exposed."

Update (4:30 PM Thursday): Asked about the strikers' demands, a McDonald's spokesperson e-mailed *The Nation*, "We have offered to have the most appropriate person in our management team meet with the students directly to address and resolve their concerns." She said that the information being distributed to franchisees about compliance with J-1 restrictions would be sent out this week, but as "internal company documents," would not be shared with the media. Asked what will happen to the McDonald's stores that had been Cheung's, the spokesperson responded, "The franchisee will be selling his restaurants."

In an e-mailed statement, striking students called the McDonald's announcement "an important admission of labor abuse at its stores," but said that, "a change of management at three stores will not protect the guestworkers and U.S. workers at McDonald's 14,000 other stores in the U.S." The strikers reiterated their call for a meeting with the company's CEO "to come to an agreement on how to protect all McDonald's workers."

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