Disney's wage theft settlement: A drop in the bucket amid corporate exploitation

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The Walt Disney Company has agreed to pay a $233 million settlement for allegedly stealing wages from 50,000 Disneyland Park employees. The deal is the result of a class action lawsuit filed five years ago, charging that the company violated the Anaheim law that establishes minimum wages.

The settlement, praised by the mainstream media, the unions and the pseudo-left as a victory for workers, amounts to nothing more than the cost of doing business for Disney, whose 2023 revenue topped $90 billion, and in 2024 it is expected to surpass that. The park is located in Orange County, one of the most expensive regions in the country. For the workers, this payout represents an infinitesimal fraction of the wealth they generate for the company and will not change their unbearable living standards.

Corporate wage theft has become a structural feature of modern capitalism. The Economic Policy Institute (EPI) estimated that US employers steal over $50 billion annually from workers, a number far higher than all robberies, burglaries and motor vehicle thefts combined. Disney's case is just one among many.

For example, Amazon faced lawsuits for failing to compensate workers for time spent undergoing security checks. Walmart's multiple lawsuits exposed unpaid wages, inaccurate wage statements and failure to compensate for COVID-19 screening time. In each case, the fines or settlements paid by these corporations are negligible compared to their profits, while they continue their exploitative practices unabated.

The $233 million settlement, when divided among the 50,000 Disney current and past employees who were swindled by the company, is utterly inadequate to offset years of exploitation, underpayment and overwork. Disney's actions, characterized by systematic denial of fair wages, highlight the prioritization of shareholder profits over the well-being of workers.

Even the so-called "improved" wages at Disneyland—a result of previous legal and public pressures—remain woefully inadequate. As of 2024, according to Suzi Brown, a spokesperson for Disney, all cast members make at least the Measure L requirement of $19.90 per hour.

In Orange County, where the median rent is $3,058 per month, according to Zillow, this wage ensures poverty. The MIT Living Wage Calculator (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) estimates that a living wage for a single adult in Orange County is $30.48 per hour. For a single parent with one child, this figure rises to $50.97 per hour. Unable to endure high housing costs, many workers are forced to commute long distances, further straining their budgets and well-being.

According to a report by United Way, one in three families in the county struggles to meet basic needs. Homelessness has surged, with over 7,300 individuals reported as unhoused in the region. More specifically, a 2018 survey revealed that nearly 70 percent of Disneyland workers reported being food insecure, and over 10 percent had experienced homelessness or unstable housing within the prior two years.

Under capitalism, a deeper kind of theft lies in the system itself, where workers are stripped of the surplus value they create. Profits are siphoned off the labor of workers to enrich owners and shareholders, leaving workers with a fraction of the value produced.

In 2016 and 2018, Senator Bernie Sanders made headlines by publicly criticizing Disney's low wages and calling for reforms. His rallies outside Disneyland, supported by the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), became a media spectacle. The purpose was to block workers from taking collective strike action and reduce them to making appeals to the conscience of mega-millionaires and billionaires who own the corporation.

While Sanders, the unions and the DSA painted these publicity stunts as great advances for workers, the end product was the passage of Anaheim's Measure L ballot initiative in 2018. While hospitality employers continued to receive city tax rebates and other subsidies, workers were locked into a cycle of poverty, with most wages pegged at $15 in 2019 with $1 yearly increases. By 2024, wages of $19.90 an hour were far outpaced by inflation and rising costs of living. A 2.6 percent increase in 2025 underscores the inadequacy of the ballot measure, proving systemic exploitation remains unchallenged under capitalism.

The unions at Disneyland—including the Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers (BCTGM), the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), the Teamsters and the United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW)—have systematically undermined workers' resistance. Earlier this year, Disneyland employees voted 99 percent in favor of a strike, reflecting widespread anger over poverty wages and deteriorating conditions. Far from mobilizing this sentiment into meaningful action, the union bureaucracies opted for backroom deals with management that ensured another betrayal.

Beyond wage theft, Disneyland workers face hazardous working conditions and lack job security. Multiple reports have highlighted unsafe environments leading to injuries and even deaths among employees. Additionally, several tragic incidents involving guest fatalities at Disney parks underscore the company's prioritization of profit over safety. Despite these alarming trends, Disney has faced virtually no accountability, thanks to the complicity of regulatory bodies and unions alike.

Job safety and job security, once won through bitter struggles by workers—particularly in the wave of militant labor movements following the Russian Revolution—are now being systematically eroded. The rights and protections fought for in those historic battles are being stripped away, leaving workers increasingly vulnerable.

Disney's recent layoffs further illustrate this trend. Over the past two years, under CEO Bob Iger's return, the company has undergone significant restructuring aimed at cutting costs and increasing workloads. Tens of thousands of workers were laid off, exacerbating economic insecurity among employees while shareholders reaped the benefits of "efficiency" measures. Iger's return was explicitly framed as an opportunity to "streamline operations," a euphemism for squeezing more profit through corporate restructuring and layoffs.

While thousands of Disney employees live paycheck to paycheck, often skipping meals to make ends meet, company executives enjoy obscene salaries and bonuses. Iger's 2023 pay package was $31.6 million, 800 times what a Disneyland worker earning the minimum wage brings home.

The Disney wage theft case underscores the need for a broader, unified struggle against corporate exploitation. Workers cannot rely on union bureaucrats, politicians or pseudo-left organizations to fight for their interests. Instead, they must build independent rank-and-file committees to advance their demands and link their struggles with those of workers across industries and countries.

Real change will come not from legal settlements or ineffective reforms, always offset by other cuts or inflation but from the organized power of the working class. This requires a political movement aimed at dismantling the capitalist system that enables and perpetuates poverty, inequality and war. The Disney case is not an isolated incident but a symptom of a deeply diseased system—one that must be overturned by the collective action of the international working class.