

'Day of Action' for workers

By Lisa Colangelo

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Low-wage workers, struggling to make ends meet in New York City, will rally together with community leaders and union organizers on July 24 for a “Day of Action.”

Labor heavyweights, including 32BJ Service Employees International Union and the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU), have embarked on aggressive efforts to organize workers at car washes, supermarkets and area airports.

United NY — a union-backed community group — is helping coordinate the afternoon event which starts with a press conference at Herald Square, followed by a march to Union Square and a rally.

“Increasing wages for low-wage workers is crucial for real recovery in New York,” said RWDSU President Stuart Appelbaum. “It makes economic sense that low-wage workers do better. Every penny they get they are going to spend.”

According to United NY, the average minimum-wage worker makes just \$15,000 a year.

And those who work in the service industry often see their tips stolen by employers and bosses.

“We want to raise awareness that increasing the minimum wage makes a real difference in the lives of working people,” said Héctor Figueroa, the secretary-treasurer of 32BJ SEIU. “This is what labor unions should really be about.”

James Parrott of the Fiscal Policy Institute used some stark statistics to paint a picture of low-wage New York.

The number of New Yorkers making less than \$10 an hour jumped from 16.4% in 1990 to 18.5% in 2010.

But when you take into account the size of the city’s workforce, the number of workers making less than \$10 an hour increased by 42%, Parrott said.

“It starts with raising the minimum wage but it doesn’t stop there,” said Figueroa. “People need to secure health insurance and retirement benefits.”

While higher-wage jobs have been disappearing, lower-wage jobs — such as retail positions and home health aides — are on the upswing.

Parrott said since mid-2008 — the start of the recession — low-wage sectors have added over 100,000 jobs.

On the other hand, middle-wage sectors (jobs where people make between \$45,000 and \$75,000 a year) lost a net of 42,000 jobs. Higher-wage sectors lost 11,000 jobs.

“People are really hurting in this city,” said Appelbaum. “People are going to work at honest jobs and they are still condemned to a life of poverty.”

“I think it’s significant that we are all coming together and saying the problem is so large the solution has to be one that deals with all low-wage workers,” he said. “And the best way to deal with that is union contracts.”