Regardless of the billions spent on marketing and promotion, all the ads on radio and TV, all the efforts to create brand loyalty, the major chains must live with the unsettling fact that more than 70 percent of fast food visits are "impulsive." The decision to stop for fast food is made on the spur of the moment, without much thought. The vast majority of customers do not set out to eat at a Burger King, a Wendy's, or a McDonald's. Often, they're not even planning to stop for food — until they see a sign, a familiar building, a set of golden arches. Fast food, like the tabloids at a supermarket checkout, is an impulse buy. In order to succeed, fast food restaurants must be seen.

The McDonald's Corporation has perfected the art of restaurant site selection. In the early days Ray Kroc flew in a Cessna to find schools, aiming to put new restaurants nearby. McDonald's later used helicopters to assess regional growth patterns, looking for cheap land along highways and roads that would lie at the heart of future suburbs. In the 1980s, the chain become one of the world's leading purchasers of commercial satellite photography, using it to predict sprawl from outer space. McDonald's later developed a computer software program called Quintillion that automated its site-selection process, combining satellite imagery with detailed maps, demographic information, CAD drawings, and sales information from existing stores. "Geographic information systems" like Quintillion are now routinely used as site-selection tools by fast food chains and other retailers. As one marketing publication observed, the software developed by McDonald's permits businessmen to "spy on their customers with the same equipment once used to fight the cold war."

The McDonald's Corporation has used Colorado Springs as a test site for other types of restaurant technology, for software and machines designed to cut labor costs and serve fast food even faster. Steve Bigari, who owns five local McDonald's, showed me the new contraptions at his place on Constitution Avenue. It was a rounded, postmodern McDonald's on the eastern edge of the city. The drive-through lanes had automatic sensors buried in the asphalt to monitor the traffic. Robotic drink machines selected the proper cups, filled them with ice, and then filled them with soda. Dispensers powered by compressed carbon dioxide shot out uniform spurts of ketchup and mustard. An elaborate unit emptied frozen french fries from a white plastic bin into wire-mesh baskets for frying, lowered the baskets into hot oil, lifted them a few minutes later and gave them a brief shake, put them back into the oil until the fries were perfectly cooked, and

then dumped the fries underneath heat lamps, crisp and ready to be served. Television monitors in the kitchen instantly displayed the customer's order. And advanced computer software essentially ran the kitchen, assigning tasks to various workers for maximum efficiency, predicting future orders on the basis of ongoing customer flow.

Bigari was cordial, good-natured, passionate about his work, proud of the new devices. He told me the new software brought the "just in time" production philosophy of Japanese automobile plants to the fast food business, a philosophy that McDonald's has renamed Made for You. As he demonstrated one contraption after another — including a wireless hand-held menu that uses radio waves to transmit orders — a group of construction workers across the street put the finishing touches on a new subdivision called Constitution Hills. The streets had patriotic names, and the cattle ranch down the road was for sale.

throughput

EVERY SATURDAY ELISA ZAMOT gets up at 5:15 in the morning. It's a struggle, and her head feels groggy as she steps into the shower. Her little sisters, Cookie and Sabrina, are fast asleep in their beds. By 5:30, Elisa's showered, done her hair, and put on her McDonald's uniform. She's sixteen, bright-eyed and olive-skinned, pretty and petite, ready for another day of work. Elisa's mother usually drives her the half-mile or so to the restaurant, but sometimes Elisa walks, leaving home before the sun rises. Her family's modest townhouse sits beside a busy highway on the south side of Colorado Springs, in a largely poor and working-class neighborhood. Throughout the day, sounds of traffic fill the house, the steady whoosh of passing cars. But when Elisa heads for work, the streets are quiet, the sky's still dark, and the lights are out in the small houses and rental apartments along the road.

When Elisa arrives at McDonald's, the manager unlocks the door and lets her in. Sometimes the husband-and-wife cleaning crew are just finishing up. More often, it's just Elisa and the manager in the restaurant, surrounded by an empty parking lot. For the next hour or so, the two of them get everything ready. They turn on the ovens and grills. They go downstairs into the basement and get food and supplies for the morning shift. They get the paper cups, wrappers, cardboard containers, and packets of condiments. They step into the big freezer and get the frozen bacon, the frozen pancakes, and the frozen cinnamon rolls. They get the frozen hash browns, the frozen biscuits, the frozen McMuffins. They get the cartons of scrambled egg mix and orange juice mix. They bring the food upstairs and start preparing it before any customers appear, thawing some things in the microwave and cooking other things on the grill. They put the cooked food in special cabinets to keep it warm.

The restaurant opens for business at seven o'clock, and for the next hour or so, Elisa and the manager hold down the fort, handling all the orders. As the place starts to get busy, other employees arrive. Elisa works behind the counter. She takes orders and hands food to customers from breakfast through lunch. When she finally walks home, after seven hours of standing at a cash register, her feet hurt. She's wiped out. She comes through the front door, flops onto the living room couch, and turns on the TV. And the next morning she gets up at 5:15 again and starts the same routine.

Up and down Academy Boulevard, along South Nevada, Circle Drive, and Woodman Road, teenagers like Elisa run the fast food restaurants of Colorado Springs. Fast food kitchens often seem like a scene from *Bugsy Malone*, a film in which all the actors are children pretending to be adults. No other industry in the United States has a workforce so dominated by adolescents. About two-thirds of the nation's fast food workers are under the age of twenty. Teenagers open the fast food outlets in the morning, close them at night, and keep them going at all hours in between. Even the managers and assistant managers are sometimes in their late teens. Unlike Olympic gymnastics — an activity in which teenagers consistently perform at a higher level than adults — there's nothing about the work in a fast food kitchen that requires young employees. Instead of relying upon a small, stable, well-paid, and well-trained workforce, the fast food industry seeks out part-time, unskilled workers who are willing to accept low pay. Teenagers have been the perfect candidates for these jobs, not only because they are less expensive to hire than adults, but also because their youthful inexperience makes them easier to control.

The labor practices of the fast food industry have their origins in the assembly line systems adopted by American manufacturers in the early twentieth century. Business historian Alfred D. Chandler has argued that a high rate of "throughput" was the most important aspect of these mass production systems. A factory's throughput is the speed and volume of its flow — a much more crucial measurement, according to Chandler, than the number of workers it employs or the value of its machinery. With innovative technology and the proper organization, a small number of workers can produce an enormous amount of goods cheaply. Throughput is all about increasing the speed of assembly, about doing things faster in order to make more.

Although the McDonald brothers had never encountered the term "throughput" or studied "scientific management," they instinctively grasped the underlying principles and applied them in the Speedee Service System. The restaurant operating scheme they developed has been widely adopted and refined over the past half century. The ethos of the assembly line remains at its core. The fast food industry's obsession with throughput has altered the way millions of Americans work, turned commercial kitchens into small factories, and changed familiar foods into commodities that are manufactured.

At Burger King restaurants, frozen hamburger patties are placed on a conveyer belt and emerge from a broiler ninety seconds later fully cooked. The ovens at Pizza Hut and at Domino's also use conveyer belts to ensure standardized cooking times. The ovens at McDonald's look like commercial laundry presses, with big steel hoods that swing down and grill hamburgers on both sides at once. The burgers, chicken, french fries, and buns are all frozen when they arrive at a McDonald's. The shakes and sodas begin as syrup. At Taco Bell restaurants the food is "assembled," not prepared. The guacamole isn't made by workers in the kitchen; it's made at a factory in Michoacán, Mexico, then frozen and shipped north. The chain's taco meat arrives frozen and precooked in vacuum-sealed plastic bags. The beans are dehydrated and look like brownish corn flakes. The cooking process is fairly simple. "Everything's add water," a Taco Bell employee told me. "Just add hot water."

Although Richard and Mac McDonald introduced the division of labor to the restaurant business, it was a McDonald's executive named Fred Turner who created a production system of unusual thoroughness and attention to detail. In 1958, Turner put together an operations and training manual for the company that was seventy-five pages long, specifying how almost everything should be done. Hamburgers were always to be placed on the grill in six neat rows; french fries had to be exactly 0.28 inches thick. The McDonald's operations manual today has ten times the number of pages and weighs about four pounds. Known within the company as "the Bible," it contains precise instructions on how various appliances should be used, how each item on the menu should look, and how employees should greet customers. Operators who disobey these rules can lose their franchises. Cooking instructions are not only printed in the manual, they are often designed into the machines. A McDonald's kitchen is full of buzzers and flashing lights that tell employees what to do.

At the front counter, computerized cash registers issue their own commands. Once an order has been placed, buttons light up and suggest other menu items that can be added. Workers at the counter are told to increase the size of an order by recommending special promotions, pushing dessert, pointing out the financial logic behind the purchase of a larger drink. While doing so, they are instructed to be upbeat and friendly. "Smile with a greeting and make a positive first impression," a Burger King training manual suggests. "Show them you are GLAD TO SEE THEM. Include eye contact with the cheerful greeting."

The strict regimentation at fast food restaurants creates standardized products. It increases the throughput. And it gives fast food companies an enormous amount of power over their employees. "When management determines exactly how every task is to be done . . . and can impose its own rules about pace, output, quality, and technique," the sociologist Robin Leidner has noted, "[it] makes workers increasingly interchangeable." The management no longer depends upon the talents or skills of its workers — those things are built into the operating system and machines. Jobs that have been "de-skilled" can be filled cheaply. The need to retain any individual worker is greatly reduced by the ease with which he or she can be replaced.

Teenagers have long provided the fast food industry with the bulk of its workforce. The industry's rapid growth coincided with the baby-boom expansion of that age group. Teenagers were in many ways the ideal candidates for these low-paying jobs. Since most teenagers still lived at home, they could afford to work for wages too low to support an adult, and until recently, their limited skills attracted few other employers. A job at a fast food restaurant became an American rite of passage, a first job soon left behind for better things. The flexible terms of employment in the fast food industry also attracted housewives who needed extra income. As the number of baby-boom teenagers declined, the fast food chains began to hire other marginalized workers: recent immigrants, the elderly, and the handicapped.

English is now the second language of at least one-sixth of the nation's restaurant workers, and about one-third of that group speaks no

English at all. The proportion of fast food workers who cannot speak English is even higher. Many know only the names of the items on the menu; they speak "McDonald's English."

The fast food industry now employs some of the most disadvantaged members of American society. It often teaches basic job skills — such as getting to work on time — to people who can barely read, whose lives have been chaotic or shut off from the mainstream. Many individual franchisees are genuinely concerned about the well-being of their workers. But the stance of the fast food industry on issues involving employee training, the minimum wage, labor unions, and overtime pay strongly suggests that its motives in hiring the young, the poor, and the handicapped are hardly altruistic.

stroking

AT A 1999 conference on foodservice equipment, top American executives from Burger King, McDonald's, and Tricon Global Restaurants, Inc. (the owner of Taco Bell, Pizza Hut, and KFC) appeared together on a panel to discuss labor shortages, employee training, computerization, and the latest kitchen technology. The three corporations now employ about 3.7 million people worldwide, operate about 60,000 restaurants, and open a new fast food restaurant every two hours. Putting aside their intense rivalry for customers, the executives had realized at a gathering the previous evening that when it came to labor issues, they were in complete agreement. "We've come to the conclusion that we're in support of each other," Dave Brewer, the vice president of engineering at KFC, explained. "We are aligned as a team to support this industry." One of the most important goals they held in common was the redesign of kitchen equipment so that less money needed to be spent training workers. "Make the equipment intuitive, make it so that the job is easier to do right than to do wrong," advised Jerry Sus, the leading equipment systems engineer at McDonald's. "The easier it is for him [the worker] to use, the easier it is for us not to have to train him." John Reckert — director of strategic operations and of research and development at Burger King — felt optimistic about the benefits that new technology would bring the industry. "We can develop equipment that only works one way," Reckert said. "There are many different ways today that employees can abuse our product, mess up the flow . . . If the equipment only allows one process, there's very little to train." Instead of giving written instructions to crew members, another panelist suggested, rely as much as possible on photographs of menu items, and "if there are instructions, make them very simple, write them at a fifth-grade level, and write them in Spanish and English." All of the executives agreed that "zero training" was the fast food industry's ideal, though it might not ever be attained.

While quietly spending enormous sums on research and technology to eliminate employee training, the fast food chains have accepted hundreds of millions of dollars in government subsidies for "training" their workers. Through federal programs such as the Targeted Jobs Tax Credit and its successor, the Work Opportunity Tax Credit, the chains have for years claimed tax credits of up to $2,400 for each new low-income worker they hired. In 1996 an investigation by the U.S. Department of Labor concluded that 92 percent of these workers would have been hired by the companies anyway — and that their new jobs were part-time, provided little training, and came with no benefits. These federal subsidy programs were created to reward American companies that gave job training to the poor.

Attempts to end these federal subsidies have been strenuously opposed by the National Council of Chain Restaurants and its allies in Congress. The Work Opportunity Tax Credit program was renewed in 1996. It offered as much as $385 million in subsidies the following year. Fast food restaurants had to employ a worker for only four hundred hours to receive the federal money — and then could get more money as soon as that worker quit and was replaced. American taxpayers have in effect subsidized the industry's high turnover rate, providing company tax breaks for workers who are employed for just a few months and receive no training. The industry front group formed to defend these government subsidies is called the "Committee for Employment Opportunities." Its chief lobbyist, Bill Signer, told the *Houston Chronicle* there was nothing wrong with the use of federal subsidies to create low-paying, low-skilled, short-term jobs for the poor. Trying to justify the minimal amount of training given to these workers, Signer said, "They've got to crawl before they can walk."

The employees whom the fast food industry expects to crawl are by far the biggest group of low-wage workers in the United States today. The nation has about 1 million migrant farm workers and about 3.5 million fast food workers. Although picking strawberries is orders of magnitude more difficult than cooking hamburgers, both jobs are

now filled by people who are generally young, unskilled, and willing to work long hours for low pay. Moreover, the turnover rates for both jobs are among the highest in the American economy. The annual turnover rate in the fast food industry is now about 300 to 400 percent. The typical fast food worker quits or is fired every three to four months.

The fast food industry pays the minimum wage to a higher proportion of its workers than any other American industry. Consequently, a low minimum wage has long been a crucial part of the fast food industry's business plan. Between 1968 and 1990, the years when the fast food chains expanded at their fastest rate, the real value of the U.S. minimum wage fell by almost 40 percent. In the late 1990s, the real value of the U.S. minimum wage still remained about 27 percent lower than it was in the late 1960s. Nevertheless, the National Restaurant Association (NRA) has vehemently opposed any rise in the minimum wage at the federal, state, or local level. About sixty large foodservice companies — including Jack in the Box, Wendy's, Chevy's, and Red Lobster — have backed congressional legislation that would essentially eliminate the federal minimum wage by allowing states to disregard it. Pete Meersman, the president of the Colorado Restaurant Association, advocates creating a federal guest worker program to import low-wage foodservice workers from overseas.

While the real value of the wages paid to restaurant workers has declined for the past three decades, the earnings of restaurant company executives have risen considerably. According to a 1997 survey in *Nation's Restaurant News,* the average corporate executive bonus was $131,000, an increase of 20 percent over the previous year. Increasing the federal minimum wage by a dollar would add about two cents to the cost of a fast food hamburger.

In 1938, at the height of the Great Depression, Congress passed legislation to prevent employers from exploiting the nation's most vulnerable workers. The Fair Labor Standards Act established the first federal minimum wage. It also imposed limitations on child labor. And it mandated that employees who work more than forty hours a week be paid overtime wages for each additional hour. The overtime wage was set at a minimum of one and a half times the regular wage.

Today few employees in the fast food industry qualify for overtime — and even fewer are paid it. Roughly 90 percent of the nation's fast food workers are paid an hourly wage, provided no benefits, and scheduled to work only as needed. Crew members are employed "at will." If the restaurant's busy, they're kept longer than usual. If business is slow, they're sent home early. Managers try to make sure that each worker is employed less than forty hours a week, thereby avoiding any overtime payments. A typical McDonald's or Burger King restaurant has about fifty crew members. They work an average of thirty hours a week. By hiring a large number of crew members for each restaurant, sending them home as soon as possible, and employing them for fewer than forty hours a week whenever possible, the chains keep their labor costs to a bare minimum.

A handful of fast food workers are paid regular salaries. A fast food restaurant that employs fifty crew members has four or five managers and assistant managers. They earn about $23,000 a year and usually receive medical benefits, as well as some form of bonus or profit sharing. They have an opportunity to rise up the corporate ladder. But they also work long hours without overtime — fifty, sixty, seventy hours a week. The turnover rate among assistant managers is extremely high. The job offers little opportunity for independent decision-making. Computer programs, training manuals, and the machines in the kitchen determine how just about everything must be done.

Fast food managers do have the power to hire, fire, and schedule workers. Much of their time is spent motivating their crew members. In the absence of good wages and secure employment, the chains try to inculcate "team spirit" in their young crews. Workers who fail to work hard, who arrive late, or who are reluctant to stay extra hours are made to feel that they're making life harder for everyone else, letting their friends and coworkers down. For years the McDonald's Corporation has provided its managers with training in "transactional analysis," a set of psychological techniques popularized in the book *I'm OK — You're OK* (1969). One of these techniques is called "stroking" — a form of positive reinforcement, deliberate praise, and recognition that many teenagers don't get at home. Stroking can make a worker feel that his or her contribution is sincerely valued. And it's much less expensive than raising wages or paying overtime.

The fast food chains often reward managers who keep their labor costs low, a practice that often leads to abuses. In 1997 a jury in Washington State found that Taco Bell had systematically coerced its crew members into working off the clock in order to avoid paying them

overtime. The bonuses of Taco Bell restaurant managers were tied to their success at cutting labor costs. The managers had devised a number of creative ways to do so. Workers were forced to wait until things got busy at a restaurant before officially starting their shifts. They were forced to work without pay after their shifts ended. They were forced to clean restaurants on their own time. And they were sometimes compensated with food, not wages. Many of the workers involved were minors and recent immigrants. Before the penalty phase of the Washington lawsuit, the two sides reached a settlement; Taco Bell agreed to pay millions of dollars in back wages, but admitted no wrongdoing. As many as 16,000 current and former employees were owed money by the company. One employee, a high school dropout named Regina Jones, regularly worked seventy to eighty hours a week but was paid for only forty. In 2001, Taco Bell settled a class-action lawsuit in California, agreeing to pay $9 million in back wages for overtime and an Oregon jury found that Taco Bell managers had falsified the time cards of thousands of workers in order to get productivity bonuses.

detecting lies

AFTER WORKING AT Burger King restaurants for about a year, the sociologist Ester Reiter concluded that the trait most valued in fast food workers is "obedience." In other mass production industries ruled by the assembly line, labor unions have gained workers higher wages, formal grievance procedures, and a voice in how the work is performed. The high turnover rates at fast food restaurants, the part-time nature of the jobs, and the marginal social status of the crew members have made it difficult to organize their workers. And the fast food chains have fought against unions with the same zeal they've displayed fighting hikes in the minimum wage.

The McDonald's Corporation insists that its franchise operators follow directives on food preparation, purchasing, store design, and countless other minute details. Company specifications cover everything from the size of the pickle slices to the circumference of the paper cups. When it comes to wage rates, however, the company is remarkably silent and laissez-faire. This policy allows operators to set their wages according to local labor markets — and it absolves the McDonald's Corporation of any formal responsibility for roughly three-quarters of the company's workforce. McDonald's decentralized hiring practices have helped thwart efforts to organize the company's workers. But whenever a union gains support at a particular restaurant, the McDonald's Corporation suddenly shows tremendous interest in the emotional and financial well-being of the workers there.

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, McDonald's workers across the country attempted to join unions. In response the company developed sophisticated methods for keeping unions out of its restaurants. A "flying squad" of experienced managers and corporate executives was sent to a restaurant the moment union activity was suspected. Seemingly informal "rap sessions" were held with disgruntled employees. The workers were encouraged to share their feelings. They were flattered and stroked. And more importantly, they were encouraged to share information about the union's plans and the names of union sympathizers. If the rap sessions failed to provide adequate information, the stroking was abandoned for a more direct approach.

In 1973, amid a bitter organizing drive in San Francisco, a group of young McDonald's employees claimed that managers had forced them to take lie detector tests, interrogated them about union activities, and threatened them with dismissal if they refused to answer. Spokesmen for McDonald's admitted that polygraph tests had been administered, but denied that any coercion was involved. Bryan Seale, San Francisco's labor commissioner, closely studied some of McDonald's old job applications and found a revealing paragraph in small print near the bottom. It said that employees who wouldn't submit to lie detector tests could face dismissal. The labor commissioner ordered McDonald's to halt the practice, which was a violation of state law. He also ordered the company to stop accepting tips at its restaurants, since customers were being misled: the tips being left for crew members were actually being kept by the company.

The San Francisco union drive failed, as did every other McDonald's union drive — with one exception. Workers at a McDonald's in Mason City, Iowa, voted to join the United Food and Commercial Workers union in 1971. The union lasted just four years. The McDonald's Corporation no longer asks crew members to take lie detector tests and advises its franchisees to obey local labor laws. Nevertheless, top McDonald's executives still travel from Oak Brook, Illinois, to the site of a suspected union drive, even when the restaurant is overseas. Rap sessions and high-priced attorneys have proved to be effective tools for ending labor disputes. The company's guidance has

helped McDonald's franchisees defeat literally hundreds of efforts to unionize.

Despite more than three decades of failure, every now and then another group of teenagers tries to unionize a McDonald's. In February of 1997 workers at a McDonald's restaurant in St. Hubert, a suburb of Montreal, applied to join the Teamsters union. More than three-quarters of the crew members signed union cards, hoping to create the only unionized McDonald's in North America. Tom and Mike Cappelli, the operators of the restaurant, employed fifteen attorneys — roughly one lawyer for every four crew members — and filed a series of legal motions to stall the union certification process. Union leaders argued that any delay would serve McDonald's interests, because turnover in the restaurant's workforce would allow the Cappellis to hire anti-union employees. After a year of litigation, a majority of the McDonald's workers still supported the Teamsters. The Quebec labor commissioner scheduled a final certification hearing for the union on March 10, 1998.

Tom and Mike Cappelli closed the St. Hubert McDonald's on February 12, just weeks before the union was certified. Workers were given notice on a Thursday; the McDonald's shut down for good the following day, Friday the thirteenth. Local union officials were outraged. Clement Godbout, head of the Quebec Federation of Labour, accused the McDonald's Corporation of shutting down the restaurant in order to send an unmistakable warning to its other workers in Canada. Godbout called McDonald's "one of the most anti-union companies on the planet." The McDonald's Corporation denied that it had anything to do with the decision. Tom and Mike Cappelli claimed that the St. Hubert restaurant was a money-loser, though it had operated continuously at the same location for seventeen years.

McDonald's has roughly a thousand restaurants in Canada. The odds against a McDonald's restaurant in Canada going out of business — based on the chain's failure rate since the early 1990s — is about 300 to 1. "Did somebody say McUnion?" a Canadian editorial later asked. "Not if they want to keep their McJob."

This was not the first time that a McDonald's restaurant suddenly closed in the middle of a union drive. During the early 1970s, workers were successfully organizing a McDonald's in Lansing, Michigan. All the crew members were fired, the restaurant was shut down, a new McDonald's was built down the block — and the workers who'd signed union cards were not rehired. Such tactics have proven remarkably successful. As of this writing, none of the workers at the roughly fifteen thousand McDonald's in North America is represented by a union.

protecting youth

ALMOST EVERY FAST FOOD restaurant in Colorado Springs has a banner or sign that says "Now Hiring." The fast food chains have become victims of their own success, as one business after another tries to poach their teenage workers. Teenagers now sit behind the front desk at hotels, make calls for telemarketers, sell running shoes at the mall. The low unemployment rate in Colorado Springs has made the task of finding inexpensive workers even more difficult. Meanwhile, the competition among fast food restaurants has increased. Chains that have competed in the city for years keep opening new outlets, while others are entering the market for the first time. Carl's Jr. has come to Colorado Springs, opening stand-alone restaurants and "co-branded" outlets inside Texaco gas stations. When a fast food restaurant goes out of business, a new one often opens at the same location, like an army that's seized the outpost of a conquered foe. Instead of a new flag being raised, a big new plastic sign goes up.

Local fast food franchisees have little ability to reduce their fixed costs: their lease payments, franchise fees, and purchases from company-approved suppliers. Franchisees do, however, have some control over wage rates and try to keep them as low as possible. The labor structure of the fast food industry demands a steady supply of young and unskilled workers. But the immediate needs of the chains and the long-term needs of teenagers are fundamentally at odds.

At Cheyenne Mountain High School, set in the foothills, with a grand view of the city, few of the students work at fast food restaurants. Most of them are white and upper-middle class. During the summers, the boys often work as golf caddies or swimming pool lifeguards. The girls often work as babysitters at the Broadmoor. When Cheyenne Mountain kids work during the school year, they tend to find jobs at the mall, the girls employed at clothing stores like the Gap or the Limited, the boys at sporting goods stores like the Athlete's Foot. These jobs provide discounts on merchandise and a chance to visit with school friends who are out shopping. The pay of a job is often less important than its social status. Working as a hostess at an

upscale chain restaurant like Carriba's, T.G.I. Friday's, or the Outback Steakhouse is considered a desirable job, even if it pays minimum wage. Working at a fast food restaurant is considered bottom of the heap.

Jane Trogdon is head of the guidance department at Harrison High School in Colorado Springs. Harrison has the reputation of being a "rough" school, a "gang" school. The rap is not entirely deserved; it may have stuck because Harrison is where many of the city's poorest teenagers go to school. Harrison is where you will find an abundance of fast food workers. About 60 percent of the students come from low-income families. In a town with a relatively low minority population, only 40 percent of the students at Harrison are white. The school occupies a clean, modern building on the south side of town, right next to I-25. From some of the classroom windows, you can see the cars zooming past. On the other side of the interstate, a new multiplex theater with twenty-four screens beckons students to cut class.

Teachers often don't want to teach at Harrison, and some don't last there for long. Jane Trogdon has worked at the school since the day it opened in 1967. Over the past three decades, Trogdon has observed tremendous changes in the student body. Harrison was always the school on the wrong side of the tracks, but the kids today seem poorer than ever. It used to be, even in many low-income families, that the father worked and the mother stayed home to raise the children. Now it seems that no one's home and that both parents work just to make ends meet, often holding down two or three jobs. Many of the kids at Harrison are on their own from an early age. Parents increasingly turn to the school for help, asking teachers to supply discipline and direction. The teachers do their best, despite a lot of disrespect from students and the occasional threat of violence. Trogdon worries about the number of kids at Harrison who leave school in the afternoon and go straight to work, mainly at fast food restaurants. She also worries about the number of hours they're working.

Although some students at Harrison work at fast food restaurants to help their families, most of the kids take jobs after school in order to have a car. In the suburban sprawl of Colorado Springs, having your own car seems like a necessity. Car payments and insurance easily come to $300 a month. As more and more kids work to get their own wheels, fewer participate in after-school sports and activities. They stay at their jobs late into the night, neglect their homework, and come to school exhausted. In Colorado, kids can drop out of school at the age of sixteen. Dropping out often seems tempting to sophomores who are working in the "real world," earning money, being eagerly recruited by local fast food chains, retail chains, and telemarketers. Thirty years ago, businesses didn't pursue teenage workers so aggressively. Harrison usually has about four hundred students in its freshman class. About half of them eventually graduate; perhaps fifty go to college.

When Trogdon first came to work at Harrison, the Vietnam war was at its peak, and angry battles raged between long-haired students and kids whose fathers were in the military. Today she senses a profound apathy at the school. The turmoil of an earlier era has been replaced by a sad and rootless anomie. "I have lots and lots of kids who are terribly depressed," Trogdon says. "I've never seen so many, so young, feel this way."

Trogdon's insights about teenagers and after-school jobs are supported by *Protecting Youth at Work,* a report on child labor published by the National Academy of Sciences in 1998. It concluded that the long hours many American teenagers now spend on the job pose a great risk to their future educational and financial success. Numerous studies have found that kids who work up to twenty hours a week during the school year generally benefit from the experience, gaining an increased sense of personal responsibility and self-esteem. But kids who work more than that are far more likely to cut classes and drop out of high school. Teenage boys who work longer hours are much more likely to develop substance abuse problems and commit petty crimes. The negative effects of working too many hours are easy to explain: when kids go to work, they are neither at home nor at school. If the job is boring, overly regimented, or meaningless, it can create a lifelong aversion to work. All of these trends are most pronounced among poor and disadvantaged teenagers. While stressing the great benefits of work in moderation, the National Academy of Sciences report warned that short-term considerations are now limiting what millions of American kids can ever hope to achieve.

Elisa Zamot is a junior at Harrison High. In addition to working at McDonald's on the weekends, she also works there two days a week after school. All together, she spends about thirty to thirty-five hours a week at the restaurant. She earns the minimum wage. Her parents, Carlos and Cynthia, are loving but strict. They're Puerto Rican and moved to Colorado Springs from Lakewood, New Jersey. They make sure Elisa does all her homework and impose a midnight curfew.

Elisa's usually too tired to stay out late, anyway. Her school bus arrives at six in the morning, and classes start at seven.

Elisa had wanted to work at McDonald's ever since she was a toddler — a feeling shared by many of the McDonald's workers I met in Colorado Springs. But now she hates the job and is desperate to quit. Working at the counter, she constantly has to deal with rude remarks and complaints. Many of the customers look down on fast food workers and feel entitled to treat them with disrespect. Sweet-faced Elisa is often yelled at by strangers angry that their food's taking too long or that something is wrong with their order. One elderly woman threw a hamburger at her because there was mustard on it. Elisa hopes to find her next job at a Wal-Mart, at a clothing store, anywhere but a fast food restaurant. A good friend of hers works at FutureCall, the largest telemarketer in Colorado Springs and a big recruiter of teenaged labor. Her friend works there about forty hours a week, on top of attending Harrison High. The pay is terrific, but the job sounds miserable. The sort of workplace regimentation that the fast food chains pioneered has been taken to new extremes by America's telemarketers.

"IT'S TIME FOR BRINGING IN THE GREEN!" a FutureCall recruiting ad says: "Lots O' Green!" The advertisement promises wages of $10 to $15 an hour for employees who work more than forty hours a week. Elisa's friend is sixteen. After school, she stays at the FutureCall building on North Academy Boulevard until ten o'clock at night, staring at a computer screen. The computer automatically dials people throughout the United States. When somebody picks up the phone, his or her name flashes on the screen, along with the sales pitch that FutureCall's "teleservice representative" (TSR) is supposed to make on behalf of well-known credit card companies, phone companies, and retailers. TSRs are instructed never to let someone refuse a sales pitch without being challenged. The computer screen offers a variety of potential "rebuttals." TSRs make about fifteen "presentations" an hour, going for a sale, throwing out one rebuttal after another to avoid being shot down. About nine out of ten people decline the offer, but the one person who says yes makes the whole enterprise quite profitable. Supervisors walk up and down the rows, past hundreds of identical cubicles, giving pep talks, eavesdropping on phone calls, suggesting rebuttals, and making sure none of the teenage workers is doing homework on the job. The workplace at FutureCall is even more rigorously controlled than the one at McDonald's.

After graduating from Harrison, Elisa hopes to go to Princeton.

She's saving most of her earnings to buy a car. The rest is spent on clothes, shoes, and school lunches. A lot of kids at Harrison don't save any of the money earned at their fast food jobs. They buy beepers, cellular phones, stereos, and designer clothes. Kids are wearing Tommy Hilfiger and FUBU at Harrison right now; Calvin Klein is out. Hip-hop culture reigns, the West Coast brand, filtered through Compton and L.A.

During my interviews with local high school kids, I heard numerous stories of fifteen-year-olds working twelve-hour shifts at fast food restaurants and sophomores working long past midnight. The Fair Labor Standards Act prohibits the employment of kids under the age of sixteen for more than three hours on a school day, or later than seven o'clock at night. Colorado state law prohibits the employment of kids under the age of eighteen for more than eight hours a day and also prohibits their employment at jobs involving hazardous machinery. According to the workers I met, violations of these state and federal labor laws are now fairly commonplace in the fast food restaurants of Colorado Springs. George, a former Taco Bell employee, told me that he sometimes helped close the restaurant, staying there until two or three in the morning. He was sixteen at the time. Robbie, a sixteen-year-old Burger King employee, said he routinely worked ten-hour shifts. And Tommy, a seventeen-year-old who works at McDonald's, bragged about his skill with the electric tomato dicer, a machine that should have been off-limits. "I'm like an expert at using the damn thing," he said, "'cause I'm the only one that knows how to work it." He also uses the deep fryer, another labor code violation. None of these teenagers had been forced to break the law; on the contrary, they seemed eager to do it.

Most of the high school students I met liked working at fast food restaurants. They complained that the work was boring and monotonous, but enjoyed earning money, getting away from school and parents, hanging out with friends at work, and goofing off as much as possible. Few of the kids liked working the counter or dealing with customers. They much preferred working in the kitchen, where they could talk to friends and fool around. Food fights were popular. At one Taco Bell, new employees, departing employees, and employees who were merely disliked became targets for the sour cream and guacamole guns. "This kid, Leo, he smelled like guacamole for a month," one of the attackers later bragged.

The personality of a fast food restaurant's manager largely deter-

mined whether working there would be an enjoyable experience or an unpleasant one. Good managers created a sense of pride in the work and an upbeat atmosphere. They allowed scheduling changes and encouraged kids to do their schoolwork. Others behaved arbitrarily, picked on workers, yelled at workers, and made unreasonable demands. They were personally responsible for high rates of turnover. An assistant manager at a McDonald's in Colorado Springs always brought her five-year-old daughter to the restaurant and expected crew members to baby-sit for her. The assistant manager was a single mother. One crew member whom I met loved to look after the little girl; another resented it; and both found it hard to watch the child playing for hours amid the busy kitchen, the counter staff, the customers at their tables, and the life-size statue of Ronald McDonald.

None of the fast food workers I met in Colorado Springs spoke of organizing a union. The thought has probably never occurred to them. When these kids don't like the working conditions or the manager, they quit. Then they find a job at another restaurant, and the cycle goes on and on.

inside jobs

THE INJURY RATE OF teenage workers in the United States is about twice as high as that of adult workers. Teenagers are far more likely to be untrained, and every year, about 200,000 are injured on the job. The most common workplace injuries at fast food restaurants are slips, falls, strains, and burns. The fast food industry's expansion, however, coincided with a rising incidence of workplace violence in the United States. Roughly four or five fast food workers are now murdered on the job every month, usually during the course of a robbery. Although most fast food robberies end without bloodshed, the level of violent crime in the industry is surprisingly high. In 1998, more restaurant workers were murdered on the job in the United States than police officers.

America's fast food restaurants are now more attractive to armed robbers than convenience stores, gas stations, or banks. Other retail businesses increasingly rely upon credit card transactions, but fast food restaurants still do almost all of their business in cash. While convenience store chains have worked hard to reduce the amount of money in the till (at 7-Eleven stores the average robbery results in a loss of about thirty-seven dollars), fast food restaurants often have thousands of dollars on the premises. Gas stations and banks now routinely shield employees behind bullet-resistant barriers, a security measure that would be impractical at most fast food restaurants. And the same features that make these restaurants so convenient — their location near intersections and highway off-ramps, even their drive-through windows — facilitate a speedy getaway.

A fast food robbery is most likely to occur when only a few crew members are present: early in the morning before customers arrive or late at night near closing time. A couple of sixteen-year-old crew members and a twenty-year-old assistant manager are often the only people locking up a restaurant, long after midnight. When a robbery takes place, the crew members are frequently herded into the basement freezer. The robbers empty the cash registers and the safe, then hit the road.

The same demographic groups widely employed at fast food restaurants — the young and the poor — are also responsible for much of the nation's violent crime. According to industry studies, about two-thirds of the robberies at fast food restaurants involve current or former employees. The combination of low pay, high turnover, and ample cash in the restaurant often leads to crime. A 1999 survey by the National Food Service Security Council, a group funded by the large chains, found that about half of all restaurant workers engaged in some form of cash or property theft — not including the theft of food. The typical employee stole about $218 a year; new employees stole almost $100 more. Studies conducted by Jerald Greenberg, a professor of management at the University of Ohio and an expert on workplace crime, have found that when people are treated with dignity and respect, they're less likely to steal from their employer. "It may be common sense," Greenberg says, "but it's obviously not common practice." The same anger that causes most petty theft, the same desire to strike back at an employer perceived as unfair, can escalate to armed robbery. Restaurant managers are usually, but not always, the victims of fast food crimes. Not long ago, the day manager of a McDonald's in Moorpark, California, recognized the masked gunman emptying the safe. It was the night manager.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) attempted in the mid-1990s to issue guidelines for preventing violence at restaurants and stores that do business at night. OSHA was

prompted, among other things, by the fact that homicide had become the leading cause of workplace fatalities among women. The proposed guidelines were entirely voluntary and seemed innocuous. OSHA recommended, for example, that late-night retailers improve visibility within their stores and make sure their parking lots were well lit. The National Restaurant Association, along with other industry groups, responded by enlisting more than one hundred congressmen to oppose any OSHA guidelines on retail violence. An investigation by the *Los Angeles Times* found that many of these congressmen had recently accepted donations from the NRA and the National Association of Convenience Stores. "Who would oppose putting out guidelines on saving women's lives in the workplace?" Joseph Dear, a former head of OSHA, said to a *Times* reporter. "The companies that employ those women."

The restaurant industry has continued to fight not only guidelines on workplace violence, but any enforcement of OSHA regulations. At a 1997 restaurant industry "summit" on violence, executives representing the major chains argued that OSHA guidelines could be used by plaintiffs in lawsuits stemming from a crime, that guidelines were completely unnecessary, and that there was no need to supply the government with "potentially damaging" robbery statistics. The group concluded that OSHA should become just an information clearinghouse without the authority to impose fines or compel security measures. For years, one of OSHA's most severe critics in Congress has been Jay Dickey, an Arkansas Republican who once owned two Taco Bells. In January of 1999 the National Council of Chain Restaurants helped to form a new organization to lobby against OSHA regulations. The name of the industry group is the "Alliance for Workplace Safety."

The leading fast food chains have tried to reduce violent crime by spending millions on new security measures — video cameras, panic buttons, drop-safes, burglar alarms, additional lighting. But even the most heavily guarded fast food restaurants remain vulnerable. In April of 2000 a Burger King on the grounds of Offut Air Force Base in Nebraska was robbed by two men in ski masks carrying shotguns. They were wearing purple Burger King shirts and got away with more than $7,000. Joseph A. Kinney, the president of the National Safe Workplace Institute, argues that the fast food industry needs to make fundamental changes in its labor relations. Raising wages and making a real commitment to workers will do more to cut crime than investing in hidden cameras. "No other American industry," Kinney notes, "is robbed so frequently by its own employees."

Few of the young fast food workers I met in Colorado Springs were aware that working early in the morning or late at night placed them in some danger. Jose, on the other hand, had no illusions. He was a nineteen-year-old assistant manager with a sly, mischievous look. Before going to work at McDonald's, Jose had been a drug courier and a drug dealer in another state. He'd witnessed the murder of close friends. Many of his relatives were in prison for drug-related and violent crimes. Jose had left all that behind; his job at McDonald's was part of a new life; and he liked being an assistant manager because the work didn't seem hard. He was not, however, going to rely on McDonald's for his personal safety. He said that video cameras weren't installed at his restaurant until the Teeny Beanie Babies arrived. "Man, people really want to rip those things off," he said. "You've got to keep your eye on them." Jose often counts the money and closes the restaurant late at night. He always brings an illegal handgun to work, and a couple of his employees carry handguns, too. He's not afraid of what might happen if an armed robber walks in the door one night. "Ain't nothing that he could do to me," Jose said, matter-of-factly, "that I couldn't do to him."

The May 2000 murder of five Wendy's employees during a robbery in Queens, New York, received a great deal of media attention. The killings were gruesome, one of the murderers had previously worked at the restaurant, and the case unfolded in the media capital of the nation. But crime and fast food have become so ubiquitous in American society that their frequent combination usually goes unnoticed. Just a few weeks before the Wendy's massacre in Queens, two former Wendy's employees in South Bend, Indiana, received prison terms for murdering a pair of coworkers during a robbery that netted $1,400. Earlier in the year two former Wendy's employees in Anchorage, Alaska, were charged with the murder of their night manager during a robbery. Hundreds of fast food restaurants are robbed every week. The FBI does not compile nationwide statistics on restaurant robberies, and the restaurant industry will not disclose them. Local newspaper accounts, however, give a sense of these crimes.

In recent years: Armed robbers struck nineteen McDonald's and Burger King restaurants along Interstate 85 in Virginia and North Carolina. A former cook at a Shoney's in Nashville, Tennessee, became

a fast food serial killer, murdering two workers at a Captain D's, three workers at a McDonald's, and a pair of Baskin Robbins workers whose bodies were later found in a state park. A dean at Texas Southern University was shot and killed during a carjacking in the drive-through lane of a KFC in Houston. The manager of a Wal-Mart McDonald's in Durham, North Carolina, was shot during a robbery by two masked assailants. A nine-year-old girl was killed during a shootout between a robber and an off-duty police officer waiting in line at a McDonald's in Barstow, California. A twenty-year-old manager was killed during an armed robbery at a Sacramento, California, McDonald's; the manager had recognized one of the armed robbers, a former McDonald's employee; it was the manager's first day in the job. A former employee at a McDonald's in Vallejo, California, shot three women who worked at the restaurant after being rejected for a new job; one of the women was killed, and the murderer left the restaurant laughing. And in Colorado Springs, a jury convicted a former employee of first degree murder for the execution-style slayings of three teenage workers and a female manager at a Chuck E. Cheese's restaurant. The killings took place in Aurora, Colorado, at closing time, and police later arrived to find a macabre scene. The bodies lay in an empty restaurant as burglar alarms rang, game lights flashed, a vacuum cleaner ran, and Chuck E. Cheese mechanical animals continued to perform children's songs.

making it fun

AT THE THIRTY-EIGHTH Annual Multi-Unit Foodserver Operators Conference held a few years ago in Los Angeles, the theme was "People: The Single Point of Difference." Most of the fourteen hundred attendees were chain restaurant operators and executives. The ballroom at the Century Plaza Hotel was filled with men and women in expensive suits, a well-to-do group whose members looked as though they hadn't grilled a burger or mopped a floor in a while. The conference workshops had names like "Dual Branding: Case Studies from the Field" and "Segment Marketing: The Right Message for the Right Market" and "In Line and on Target: The Changing Dimensions of Site Selection." Awards were given for the best radio and television ads. Restaurants were inducted into the Fine Dining Hall of Fame. Chains competed to be named Operator of the Year. Foodservice companies filled a nearby exhibition space with their latest products:

dips, toppings, condiments, high-tech ovens, the latest in pest control. The leading topic of conversation at the scheduled workshops, in the hallways and hotel bars, was how to find inexpensive workers in an American economy where unemployment had fallen to a twenty-four-year low.

James C. Doherty, the publisher of *Nation's Restaurant News* at the time, gave a speech urging the restaurant industry to move away from relying on a low-wage workforce with high levels of turnover and to promote instead the kind of labor policies that would create long-term careers in foodservice. How can workers look to this industry for a career, he asked, when it pays them the minimum wage and provides them no health benefits? Doherty's suggestions received polite applause.

The keynote speech was given by David Novak, the president of Tricon Global Restaurants. His company operates more restaurants than any other company in the world — 30,000 Pizza Huts, Taco Bells, and KFCs. A former advertising executive with a boyish face and the earnest delivery style of a motivational speaker, Novak charmed the crowd. He talked about the sort of recognition his company tried to give its employees, the pep talks, the prizes, the special awards of plastic chili peppers and rubber chickens. He believed the best way to motivate people is to have fun. "Cynics need to be in some other industry," he said. Employee awards created a sense of pride and esteem, they showed that management was watching, and they did not cost a lot of money. "We want to be a great company for the people who make it great," Novak announced. Other speakers talked about teamwork, empowering workers, and making it "fun."

During the President's Panel, the real sentiments of the assembled restaurant operators and executives became clear. Norman Brinker — a legend in the industry, the founder of Bennigan's and Steak and Ale, the current owner of Chili's, a major donor to the Republican Party — spoke to the conference in language that was simple, direct, and free of platitudes. "I see the possibility of unions," he warned. The thought "chilled" him. He asked everyone in the audience to give more money to the industry's key lobbying groups. "And [Senator] Kennedy's pushing hard on a $7.25 minimum wage," he continued. "That'll be fun, won't it? I love the idea of that. I sure do — strike me dead!" As the crowd laughed and roared and applauded Brinker's call to arms against unions and the government, the talk about teamwork fell into the proper perspective.