

Starbucks Strike: A Union Member's Perspective

By: Katrina Scalise

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Maria had planned on a long summer of working for BU Housing and part-time at Starbucks, but within a few weeks into June, her backpack contents went from her wallet and lip balm to her laptop and megaphone.

Maria Isaza is a 19-year-old film and TV student from Texas and student-worker at the Brookline Starbucks location at 874 Commonwealth Ave., where workers held a historic 64-day strike from July 18 to Sept. 21, the longest in company history, demanding fairer wages and hours.

“Baristas absolutely did not have a voice,” Isaza said. “We were overwhelmed with how understaffed we were and underpaid — I was making \$15.40 an hour to run around for six hours — it’s not a fair wage for how expensive it is here.”

Starbucks locations in several states have gone on strike during 2022, costing an estimated \$375,000 total in lost revenue, according to Starbucks Workers United, the company’s primary union.

Although Isaza works part time at Starbucks, she noticed the “obvious” tension building between coworkers and management. After her location unionized in May, the store received a new temporary manager who cut hours, under-scheduled employees, and attempted to enforce a minimum availability.

“To us it felt like her placement was a direct result of us unionizing, because this manager was known for union-busting,” she said.

The Brookline Starbucks employees’ strike began on July 18. Isaza helped plan some of the larger picket events, spread the word on social media and reached out to influential people to lend their support. Strikers brought signs, speakers, microphones, karaoke machines, and chanted to keep the 24/7 picket line active.

The strike drew a crowd of supporters who sat with the employees, which spanned the generations. “I felt validated in our cause,” she said, “because we had young people, teenagers and even elderly people come sit with us and share their support.”

“At one point we even had a child come up to us and ask if he could hold a sign. I felt like I was seeing the future of the world and the workforce,” she said.

Over the nine weeks of the strike, Boston Mayor Michelle Wu, U.S. senators Elizabeth Warren, Bernie Sanders and U.S. Representative Ayanna Pressley spoke at the picket line.

Isaza said she felt gratified that her cause was being heard. “It’s an odd feeling realizing that these big politicians are like us, standing on the picket line,” she said. “We felt seen and we knew that there were people on our side who had influence over what happens in our country.”

The months-long strike ended inconclusively, and the Brookline location declared a partial victory. However, the strike left an impact on how Isaza views workers rights: Isaza is an official member of the Starbucks Workers United Union, and plans to eventually join the Producers Guild of America or a similar union in her aspiring career as a film producer.

Isaza also learned the community cared more than she anticipated, “People who didn’t work there, and weren’t getting paid would sit there from 4 to 8 in the morning,” she said. “We see so much negativity in the media that you forget about the good parts and how much people want to support you.”