

RESTAURANT WORKERS ORGANIZER AND AUTHOR WOWS CINCINNATI INTERFAITH WORKERS CENTER MAY DAY BRUNCH

An overflow crowd attended the annual May Day Brunch sponsored by the Cincinnati Interfaith Workers Center at St. Monica-St. George Parish. Union members, faith leaders, and civic activists comprised the attendees who heard a dynamic speaker describe the reform movement now underway to improve the lives of restaurant workers across America. A rapt audience listened as Saru Jayaraman, co-founder and co-director of Restaurant Opportunities Centers United, reviewed the sad history of restaurant workers and the current efforts to eliminate what amounts to their wage slavery.

Jayaraman earmarked the practice of tipping as the long term factor that entrenched low wages for restaurant workers in the U.S. Imported to this country after the Civil War, tipping was the only form of payment for the former slaves who became Pullman Car employees during that era. Tipping soon became common in restaurants, and owners began to exploit this custom as a justification for paying low salaries. Ironically, noted Jayaraman, tipping began in England at places such as Downton Abbey as a reward for good work over and above a regular wage.

This tradition of customer tipping has been successfully used over the years as the reason to provide restaurant workers with a lower minimum wage than other employees under federal and state minimum wage laws. For instance, in Ohio the minimum wage is \$8.10 an hour, but only \$4.05 for restaurant workers. (The federal minimum wage is \$7.25 and \$2.13 for tipped-employees.) This wage difference, declared Jayaraman, has created a situation where millions of workers who serve you food do not have sufficient incomes to feed their own families.

Jayaraman and her organization lead the fight to end tipping as a factor in setting wages for restaurant workers and to establish a “living wage” for all employees. They are up against a powerful opponent in the National Restaurant Association, the seventh largest lobbyist group in Washington, D.C. She compared this organization to the National Rifle Association in terms of its ability to influence Congress and state legislatures. It has worked diligently, she said, to discredit her efforts.

Jayaraman and her Centers are making progress on two fronts. They have convinced several successful restaurant chains that paying a fair wage not based on customer tipping is good for business. Shake Shack and Chipotle are two well known companies that have embraced the practice of establishing reasonable wages that do not factor in tipping. These decisions by major chains provide some momentum for changing the way employees are treated in the restaurant industry.

The second area of progress centers on the number of states that have passed minimum wage laws that don't include lower minimums for restaurant employees. Six states have

taken this step, and they include California, Oregon, Alaska, Minnesota, Montana, and Nevada. Furthermore, data collected by Jayaraman and her allies show that the economies actually improve in states that pass universal and fair minimum wage legislation. Their research refutes the standard argument of the National Restaurant Association that such actions will decrease jobs and cause many restaurants to do badly or go out of business.

Jayaraman's story sparked optimism in a crowd that often hears bad news about growing income inequality in this country. Much still needs to be done, she acknowledges, in an industry where 70 percent of tipped-workers are women, who because of their lowly economic status often suffer sexual harassment. Pushing the minimum wage to \$15 an hour also looms as a major part of Restaurant Opportunities Centers United's goal of achieving a "living wage."

Besides her role as an organizer for ROCU, Jayaraman is also director of the Food Labor Research Center at the University of California. Much of the information included in her speech at the Workers Center' brunch can be found in her book, Forked: A New Standard for American Dining. The May Day event offered a good venue for Jayaraman's story, because of the Cincinnati Interfaith Workers Center's commitment to advocating for exploited and powerless workers.