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Behind the kitchen door

Labor organizer Saru Jayaraman says that restaurants are the next front in the fight for food justice

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Fair trade, farm-to-table, locally sourced: Restaurant menus are replete with politically correct terms, but the kitchen door conceals another struggle. Labor organizer Saru Jayaraman reveals why the treatment of restaurant workers ought to be the next front in our fight for food justice.

What really goes on behind the kitchen door in a restaurant? In her book by that same title, Saru Jayaraman, co-founder and organizer for the Restaurant Opportunities Centers United (ROCU), points out that people in the food movement, which has been effective in advocating for changes in the way we produce and consume food, have missed a critical part of the path from grower to consumer: the people who prepare our food.

Mike Wold: Tell me what's going on behind the kitchen door.

Saru Jayaraman: What's happening is the largest and fastest-growing industry in the United States — over 10 million workers. It's also the lowest-paying employer in the U.S. Seven of the 10 lowest-paid jobs in America and the two lowest-paid jobs in America are restaurant jobs — dishwashers and fast-food cooks. That means the largest and fastest-growing sector of the economy is proliferating poverty-wage jobs in the U.S.

I argue that there's at least one person in every restaurant in America who is homeless or verging on homelessness or in a home-insecure situation because the wages are so low they're not enough for somebody to survive on.

The real cause of all this is an industry lobby called the National Restaurant Association, which we call the other NRA, that has made a deal with Congress that tipped-workers' wages will never go up ever. So it's been stuck at \$2.15 an hour for the last 22 years.

M.W.: We've already got some of what you want here in Seattle, right?

S.J.: Washington is one of seven states in the country that has no difference between tipped wages and non-tipped wages, but the fact that the industry sets the floor so low nationally drives down wages even in Washington state.

The other issue workers face is 90 percent of these workers don't have paid sick days. Two-thirds cook, prepare and serve food when they're sick. And 90 percent of food-borne illnesses can be traced back to sick restaurant workers.

M.W.: In Seattle we have paid sick days; there was an attempt at the state level to repeal that.

S.J.: The Restaurant Association's behind that.

M.W.: You want people to speak to restaurant management — you even provide a restaurant guide and an instructional video on your website (rocunited.org/dinersguide/) on how to do it. But you suggest consumers be really nonconfrontational.

S.J.: We organize workers to stand up when there's exploitation on the job. And that sometimes has to be confrontational. But the role of consumers is not to scream and yell.

As consumers we have incredible power every time we speak up. We've seen the change happen with local and organic. People did change restaurant menus to provide locally sourced organic menu items. So it is possible to speak up on paid sick days and minimum wage and see the same kind of impact.

We don't recommend that you talk to your waiter; you can get your waiter in trouble. We recommend that you talk to the management at the end of your meal. We did create a smartphone app for people who are afraid to speak up. In the back of our diners' guide there are tip cards that you

can just leave with your check, or you can just tweet a message with your smartphone.

Please don't think that just tipping better is enough; tipping better is great, but we need people to actually speak up.

M.W.: Why isn't tipping the solution?

S.J.: People think that the tip is something you put on top of a wage, when in fact in most of the country the tip is actually the wage. This industry is the only industry that's won exemptions so they don't have to pay their own workers' wages. We're just feeding the industry's subsidy, which is the expectation that consumers will pay their workers' wages for them. It's great to tip well, because the workers rely on it, but at the same time we need to be fighting (for a fair wage).

The food movement in general, the solutions have been very individual — “grow local, go to your farmers market, grow local gardens, that's what change is all about.” When, in fact, we need to have some collective voice and power.

We're asking people to do three things: One, help build a buzz around the books, so we can lift these issues up to the national stage. Two, join The Welcome Table and become part of a consumer movement for change, and three, speak up every time you eat out, the way that instructional video shows.

The Welcome Table can be found at TheWelcomeTable.net, an on-line consumer organization of people coming together and demanding that Congress raise the

minimum wage. That's the first issue, but later it could be about paid sick days, it could be about GMOs. The tag line is “gathering for a responsible food system.”

M.W.: What about unions?

S.J.: (One thousandth of a) percent of restaurant workers are unionized. This industry's exploding so fast, and it's so different from traditional manufacturing that new models are needed. If we really want to think about transforming this industry in our lifetime, it can't just be about going after individual restaurants. We need to think about lifting standards across the board. These workers have been waiting for two decades for their tipped wage to go up.

In June we got George Miller (D-Calif.) in the House and Tom Harkin (D-Iowa) in the Senate to introduce the Fair Minimum Wage Act of 2012. It was the first time in two decades that congressional leadership introduced a bill that included tipped workers. We need to move this bill. We need to move it fast. It has a good chance — as good as ACA (Affordable Care Act) had. The challenge will be that the Restaurant Association is going to push hard for the tipped workers to be left out. Even our allies on the Hill sometimes in the last minute will say, “Oh, well, we can get rid of this opposition if we just raise everybody else's wages but not the tipped workers.”

M.W.: What are some of the challenges of organizing restaurant workers?