
Do You Give As Much Thought to Restaurant Workers as You Do to Your Organic Chicken?

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By Amy B Dean, Truthout | Interview

An interview with organizer Saru Jayaraman of Restaurant Opportunities Centers United

There's little question that the vast majority of restaurant workers in the United States could use a union. On the whole, their jobs offer low pay and few benefits and employees have little job security. Yet they are also a very difficult group to organize: turnover in the industry is high, the workforce is largely an immigrant one, and employers effectively use threats of deportation and other retaliation against those who speak up.

Over the past decade, the Restaurant Opportunities Centers, now a national organization known as ROC-United, has taken on these challenges. While not a union, ROC-United has brought together 10,000 restaurant workers into an advocacy organization devoted to improving wages and working conditions. In recent years, ROC has expanded beyond New York City and launched affiliates in New Orleans, Miami, Michigan, Chicago, Philadelphia, Los Angeles and Washington DC. The organization has deployed a diverse arsenal of tactics - community and workplace mobilization, lawsuits against discrimination and wage theft, high-profile research and reports on the industry, and partnerships with "high road" restaurant owners - to advance the interests of low-wage workers who have been largely beyond the reach of the traditional labor movement.

Recently, I spoke with ROC-United's co-founder and co-director, Saru Jayaraman, about how it has been able to use its status as an advocacy organization to develop fresh approaches to defending workers' rights and building alliances in the community. Next month will see the release of Jayaraman's first book, *Behind the Kitchen Door*, which challenges foodies who demand organic, fair-trade and free-range ingredients in their food to pay just as much attention to the people who do the majority of the work in the restaurants we patronize.

I started by asking Jayaraman about her background and about how ROC got started.

"My background is that I am a child of immigrants from India," she said. "I grew up in California, then ended up going back East for law school and graduate school, and I got more and more engaged in immigrant worker issues. Ultimately, after 9/11, I received a phone call from the union that was in Windows on the World, the restaurant at the top of the World Trade Center. They asked if I would start an organization that would initially support the workers who had lost their jobs and the families of the victims."

"We started in those early days just helping people get back on their feet. But something happened very shortly after the tragedy, which is that the owner of Windows opened up a new restaurant in Times Square, refused to hire any of his former employees from Windows. The workers felt a lot of moral outrage at that. We organized a protest in front of the new restaurant on opening night. The owner ended up hiring everybody who wanted to work there. That was in 2002."

"It was on the cover of the Metro Section of The New York Times and got a bunch of other press. Instantly, we were overwhelmed, flooded with calls for help from workers, first all over New York City and then all over the country."

Jayaraman discussed the conditions in the restaurant industry that soon came to the fore: "We did some research early on, in those early days," she said, "and we found that the restaurant industry really is neck-and-neck with retail as the nation's largest private-sector employer. It has over 10 million workers. An estimated 1 in 10 American workers are employed in the restaurant industry. It's been one of the fastest growing [sectors of the economy], even during the economic crisis. But it also has 7 of the 10 lowest-paying jobs in America. Actually, the two absolute lowest-paying jobs in America are restaurant jobs: fast food cooks and dishwashers. Largely due to the power of the National Restaurant Association, which has been named the tenth-most-powerful lobbying group in Congress, the minimum wage for tipped workers has been stuck at \$2.13 at the federal level for the last 21 years."

I asked Jayaraman about ROC-United's outreach to different constituencies: food industry employees, customers and restaurant owners.

"Our whole frame is around collective prosperity, that when workers do better, employers and consumers do better," she said. "There's a role for each of these three stakeholders - for workers, employers and consumers - to work together to improve the industry for everybody in it."

"With the workers, we've now won over 13 workplace justice campaigns against large, high-profile restaurant companies, where we've actually changed workplace policies for thousands of workers," Jayaraman explained.

"With employers, we've organized close to 100 responsible employers, high-road employers that are doing the right thing: providing good wages and good working conditions. With consumers, we've launched a multi-year, multimedia consumer engagement campaign to build a groundswell of support for the local and federal legislative policy changes that we want to see, particularly raising the minimum wage for tipped workers."

"I would say one of the most exciting, promising pieces of all of this is the fact that the food movement has been so explosive," she continued. "It has reached so many laypeople who would not typically think of themselves as activists or care about labor issues. There's phenomenal potential to reach a much wider audience of people, people who just care about

what they eat and where they eat out."

"We put out a ROC National Diner's Guide, for example, with the minimum wage, paid sick days and promotions practices of the 150 most popular restaurants in America. And we created a smartphone app out of the guide. It allows consumers to know these things every time they eat out, to speak up every time they eat out, to send tweets every time they eat out, letting the employer know that they care about these issues."

"In these ways, like with my book, we're engaging foodies. We're getting people to view the connections between small farms and local sourcing and organics and the minimum wage and paid sick days."

To follow up, I was curious to hear about some more specific examples of how ROC-United has mobilized workers.

"Our most recent victory was against Mario Batali, who is considered to be probably the most famous chef in America," Jayaraman said. "He has a four-star restaurant in New York called Del Posto. We were approached by a group of bussers and runners from that restaurant, Latino and Bangladeshi employees."

"We ended up organizing 40 or 50 workers in that restaurant company. After a year-and-a-half campaign, Batali now has agreed to get rid of an abusive chef, create a new promotions policy and institute paid sick days for all his employees. This is a really big deal for workers in our industry. Batali is actually joining our High-Road Roundtable to promote a different way of doing business and to become a spokesperson on these issues."

Jayaraman added: "In other restaurants, we've won grievance procedures, job security, promotions, raises, paid sick days, vacation days, holiday time."

I also wanted to hear more about the consumer piece of the organizing, and I asked if ROC-United has called on people to boycott any restaurants.

"We generally don't do that," she responded. "Right now we have a campaign against Darden, which is the world's largest full-service restaurant company. It owns Olive Garden, Red Lobster and the Capital Grille Steakhouse. The Capital Grille Steakhouse is the fine-dining segment of the company and that's where we've been organizing. We've organized workers in six or seven cities in Capital Grille Steakhouses and that's led to a larger campaign against the whole company."

"But in that campaign, we're not asking people to stop eating there. We want people to go in and say things when they eat there, or even when they're passing by an Olive Garden or Red Lobster. We want them to engage in social media-type activity. We generally don't do boycotts because we feel like, in our industry, the more effective thing is to actually go in and speak up."

Jayaraman continued: "The reason for this is actually connected to the food movement. Over the course of our organizing in the food industry, we've seen an incredible thing. About five or six years ago, when Eric Schlosser's book, *Fast Food Nation*, came out, and when Michael Pollan's *Omnivore's Dilemma* came out, a consumer-driven movement - totally unorganized - led to a radical transformation. [*Fast Food Nation* was published in 2001 and *Omnivore's Dilemma* in 2006.] Restaurants across America do now provide locally sourced, organic menu items. It was because consumers started asking if their food was local, if it was organic."

Jayaraman asked if I watched the show *Portlandia*. "There's an episode in that show where a

couple goes into a restaurant and they are really obnoxious," she said. "They keep asking the server about the chicken: 'Is it locally-sourced? How is the chicken? How was it treated? Did it have friends?'"

"It's really funny, but sometimes we say, 'This is our dream.' If consumers would ask management those type of questions about working conditions, you would see a response. It would become trendy to provide paid sick days and do a little bit better by workers. This is an industry that follows trends."

"That's how we ended up launching a multi-year customer engagement campaign. It started in 2008 with us convening the Food Chain Workers Alliance, which is an alliance of worker organizations along the food chain. It reaches from farm workers all the way up to restaurant workers and grocery store workers. That alliance has been pivotal for bringing all of us together to speak to the food movement. We're saying, 'Sustainable food has to include sustainable working conditions.' There's no question about it."