

Food Service Workers And The Food Movement

An Emerging Partnership

Saru Jayaraman

OVER THE LAST SIX YEARS, the Restaurant Opportunities Center (ROC) has been developing and growing a consumer engagement campaign, seeking to partner with community organizations in the “good food” movement—including those seeking sustainable, locally-sourced, and organic food, to advocates for healthy food access in low-income communities, to those advocating for family farms and much more. ROC has sought these partnerships to expand the definition of sustainable food to include sustainable working conditions for food workers, and also to connect the issues faced by low-wage workers in the food system to the concerns of the good food movement.

Context: The U.S. Restaurant Industry

With over 10 million workers, the restaurant industry right now is one of the largest and fastest growing segments of the U.S. economy. 1 in 12 Americans currently works in the restaurant industry. It was one of the only segments of the economy to grow during the economic crisis of the last several years. However, the restaurant industry is also the lowest-paying employer in the U.S. 7 of the 11 lowest-paying jobs and the 2 absolute lowest-paying jobs in the U.S. are restaurant jobs. Restaurant servers are subject to the federal minimum wage for tipped workers, which has been stuck



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at \$2.13 an hour for the last 22 years. As a result, servers use food stamps at double the rate of the rest of the U.S. workforce. 90% of restaurant workers lack paid sick days, and two-thirds report cooking, preparing and serving food while sick. Many of these challenges can be traced back to the National Restaurant Association (NRA), which has lobbied actively against minimum wage increases and paid sick days ordinances; this same lobbying group has fought actively against food regulations impacting health and obesity.

No matter how locally sourced, organic, biodynamic, vegetarian or otherwise healthy the food might be, as long as workers are too poor to be able to care for themselves and their families, or sick while cooking and serving their food the food cannot be healthy or sustainable.

Solutions: The Restaurant Opportunities Center

Over the last twelve years, the Restaurant Opportunities Center has grown into a national organization with 10,000 worker members in 32 states—almost 100 employer partners taking the “high road” to profitability and several thousand consumer members. We have won fifteen organizing campaigns against high profile restaurant companies around the country, winning \$7 million dollars in stolen tips and wages, and raises, benefits, promotions, job security, grievance procedures, paid sick days, vacation pay, holiday pay and much more for thousands of workers in these companies. We have partnered with responsible restaurant owners nationwide to prove that taking the high road reduces turnover and increases productivity.

We have also opened two worker-owned restaurants called COLORS, and created a job training program

that has helped almost 5,000 workers move up the ladder to livable wage jobs in the industry. We have published more than two dozen reports on the industry and we have won some local policy changes. We were a leading member in a coalition to raise the minimum wage for tipped workers in New York State, and we won a tip protection bill in Philadelphia, making it illegal in that city to deduct credit card processing fees from workers' tips.

However, our greatest fight over the last several years has been to raise the minimum wage for tipped workers, stuck at \$2.13 an hour for twenty-two years. When the Fair Minimum Wage Act of 2012 was introduced, it embraced the proposal of ROC and its allies to raise the minimum wage for tipped workers to 70% of the regular minimum wage. We had taken workers to Capitol Hill for our annual day of action on 2/13/2013, to highlight the tipped minimum wage still being stuck at \$2.13, when President Obama mentioned the minimum wage in his State of the Union Address, and—for the first time in several decades—advocated for raising the tipped minimum wage in the policy brief that came out that day.

To overcome the lobbying power of the NRA and advance the legislation, we would have to build a groundswell of public support. We thought about where we had seen a groundswell of public demand in our industry—and indeed, we had seen one. With the publication of Michael Pollan's book *Omnivore's Dilemma* and Eric Schlosser's book *Fast Food Nation* and the movie *Food, Inc.*, a whole movement erupted around sustainable food—defined as locally-sourced, organic, biodynamic healthy food. Consumers learned about these things and began to demand sustainable food every time they ate out, resulting in the industry changing menu items to provide as much locally-sourced organic cuisine as they could. Only ten years prior we had heard many in the industry saying they would never be able to afford it.

We began to think not only about how we could replicate the food movement's success, but also how we could partner with this movement and help to expand the definition of sustainable food to include sustainable working conditions for the people within it. We initi-

ated the Food Chain Workers Alliance, a new alliance of worker organizations throughout the food chain seeking to change the definition of sustainable food. We created a National Diners Guide and smartphone app, to give consumers the tools they needed to know how restaurants were faring on issues of wages, benefits and promotions and also to speak up each time they ate out. Mark Bittman, famous food writer for the New York Times, wrote about the Guide in 2012, and as a result 100,000 people visited our website to download it. One New York Times reader wrote us to say, "I'd always thought about the pigs and the cows, but I'd never thought about the people. It seems like you're on the cusp of something really big."

It certainly felt that way, but we had not yet truly reached the masses. To really replicate the success of *Omnivore's Dilemma* and *Fast Food Nation*, we wrote *Behind the Kitchen Door*, and made it a national best-seller. Danny Glover's film company, Louverture Films, worked with us to develop a series of short films based on the workers and employers profiled in the book. Most importantly, the Fair Minimum Wage Act was building momentum. We created a new consumer organization called The Welcome Table, and 100,000 people signed a petition on thewelcometable.net to demand that the minimum wage for tipped and non tipped workers be raised.

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Building with the Food Movement Locally

One of the greatest examples of successful collaboration between ROC and the food movement happened in Detroit, where a growing food movement was open to working with ROC Michigan on connecting good food and good labor.

First, a campaign against exploitation and wage theft by ROC Michigan at a local fine dining restaurant company, Andiamo, brought out many allies, including food justice organizations. 1000 people turned out for picket lines at Andiamo, including many local organizations fighting for food security for low-income communities, urban gardens, and more. In the end, ROC Michigan won a tremendous victory against

the restaurant with significant policy changes. The victory laid the groundwork for greater collaboration between local food justice organizations and ROC.

Second, ROC Michigan developed deep relationships with local “high road” employers who embraced both sustainable food sourcing and sustainable working conditions. These employers provided substantial mentorship to ROC Michigan as it prepared to develop a COLORS Restaurant of its own. ROC Michigan thus embraced concepts of sustainable food sourcing and partnership with local food justice organizations from the very inception of COLORS Detroit’s development. ROC Michigan partnered with the Detroit Black Food Security Network to source items from local urban gardens. ROC Michigan’s founder and director Minsu Longiaru worked with high road employer partners to identify and hire Chef Phil Jones for the restaurant, a leader in the local “good food” movement. Chef Jones went on to become the leader of the local Food Policy Council and the local Slow Food chapter. Minsu also worked with the successful founder and owner of Avalon Breads to develop a “Cooperative Business Academy” within the restaurant, in which COLORS Michigan is training and incubating low-wage worker members to start their own sustainable, cooperative food enterprises.

In many ways, the process of launching COLORS Detroit with so much partnership with the local good food movement helped to lay the groundwork for collaboration on organizing for greater systemic change locally. Together with many of these partners, ROC Michigan developed the Good Food, Good Jobs Act, a policy proposal to use the liquor licensing process to incentivize and penalize food employers, from restaurants to liquor stores selling food, based on both their employment conditions and their provision of healthy food. The policy proposal addressed both the concerns of ROC Michigan’s restaurant workers, who faced poverty wages, lack of benefits and wage theft on the job, and the concerns of local food organizations who were concerned about the fact that so many Detroit residents were obtaining their groceries from liquor stores selling spoiled food. By addressing so many different needs through one policy proposal, ROC Michigan was able to build a coalition of 80 organizations together to support the bill. The coalition continues to seek its passage in Michigan.

Challenges and Lessons

Of course, partnering with the food movement has not been without challenges. One of the primary challenges for ROC, both at the national and multi-local level, has been the fact that the food “movement” is not a typical movement at all; there is no one or even several leading institutions with clearly shared goals. The food movement’s diffusion has also presented challenges for projects at ROC. For example, we have searched for a national partner to add criteria around restaurants’ local sourcing practices for our National Diners Guide and smartphone app, but as of yet no organization has been able or willing to partner in this way.

Nevertheless, we continue to see enormous potential for economic justice organizations and the labor movement to learn from the food movement. First, we share a common adversary with the food movement in the form of lobbying activities by large food industry trade associations. Second, as disparate as it is, the food movement has created tremendous excitement, energy and creativity among youth, people of many different classes, urban and rural residents—in general a much broader set of Americans than the economic justice movement has yet managed to reach. Some of the very same factors that make the food movement challenging to partner with—its diffuseness, its focus on individual solutions—have made it open and easy for a broad number of people to participate. It was this realization that led us to seek to partner with and replicate the food movement’s success in designing a consumer engagement campaign that could help us build the groundswell we need to raise the minimum wage.

In fact, to test our theory that people in the food movement could be moved to care about workers in the food system, we conducted a national focus group with 25 self-identified foodies. These were individuals who professed going to farmers’ markets or seeking locally-sourced, organic products. At the beginning of a week-long online chat-based focus group, 0 out of 25 participants said they would do anything to support food workers; after a week of education on issues affecting food workers, 15 out of 25 said they would join an organization of consumers seeking change for workers in the food system. It is this potential that continues to propel us to partner with food organizations at the national level and in multiple localities across the country.

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