

America's Tomorrow: Equity Is the Superior Growth Model

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Courtesy of ROC United

By Courtney Hutchison

Nestled between postings of restaurant hours, Zagat ratings, and daily specials, customers at Philadelphia's Morning Glory diner might notice an unexpected addition: a sign declaring the restaurant's Fourth Amendment right to refuse entry to immigration law enforcement without a warrant.

The sign is both an emblem of the diner's solidarity with local undocumented workers, and one of several tactics that owner Carol Mickey has been using to protect members of her staff from deportation — a threat of increasing urgency in light of the Trump administration's pledge to deport millions of undocumented immigrants.

"This is fundamentally about human rights," Mickey said. "These are people, some of whom have lived here for decades, and every day they drop off their kids at school not knowing if they'll be there to pick them up," she said. "My staff know I will do everything I can to prevent immigration enforcement from just absconding with them, pulling them away from their families and homes."

Mickey is part of a growing movement of restaurant owners and chefs who are stepping into the political fray to defend the millions of immigrant workers — many of them undocumented — who form the backbone of America's

restaurant industry.

Inspired by the dozens of cities that have enacted “sanctuary” policies — limiting local law enforcement’s participation in federal immigration enforcement in order to promote public safety and protect immigrant residents — these “[sanctuary restaurants](#)” are taking a public stance to support the dignity of all workers, regardless of race, nationality, religion, gender identity, or immigration status.

“The restaurant industry is the largest employer of immigrants in the nation, and one of the largest employers of Muslim workers and LGBTQ workers, so this is fundamentally about stepping up to protect marginalized workers targeted by the current administration,” said Sheila Maddali, director of law and organizing at [Restaurant Opportunities Centers \(ROC\) United](#), a national advocacy group representing restaurant industry workers.

ROC United co-organizes the sanctuary restaurant movement in partnership with online Latinx organizing group [Presente.org](#), offering education and advocacy support to owners and workers at over 400 sanctuary restaurants.



Local resistance through sanctuary status

Sanctuary spaces have become increasingly popular over the past several months as campuses, cities, and other public entities seek to protect immigrants, Muslims, and others facing increased surveillance and threat under the Trump administration.

Though there is no formal definition of a “sanctuary” space, this designation has most often been used by city governments who implement policies to prohibit local employees from assisting federal authorities with the enforcement of immigration laws and deportation sweeps.

The Trump administration has pushed back against sanctuary cities. In January, the President signed an executive order that threatened to pull federal funding from sanctuary jurisdictions. This order was blocked recently, however,

by a California district court that ruled the threat unconstitutional.

Unlike cities, restaurants are limited in their capacity to resist immigration enforcement, making the sanctuary restaurant designation a somewhat symbolic moniker. But that hasn't stopped hundreds of restaurant owners from leveraging the movement to raise money, increase awareness, and provide education on worker rights.

In the months since President Trump's election, Mickey, who is an attorney by day, has filed legal documents to establish the residency of her employees, identified nearby safe houses in the event of a raid, and worked with employees on English language skills.

One mile south of Morning Glory, Cristina Martinez and Ben Miller, the owners of South Philly Barbacoa, have hosted numerous dinners to [promote discussion and raise money](#) to advocate for undocumented workers. They also authored a resolution to recognize immigrant contributions to the local economy for consideration before the Philadelphia City Council.

Across the country in California, the Golden Gate Restaurant Association has [launched](#) a series of free workshops featuring legal aid to help restaurant owners advocate for their workers. Many members of the sanctuary restaurant movement also contributed to the February 16 "Day Without Immigrants" and May Day protests, which organized thousands of immigrant workers to strike, and hundreds of restaurants to close, as a demonstration of the impact that immigrant labor has on the local and national economy.

As leaders of the sanctuary restaurant movement, ROC United [disseminates materials](#) that educate workers and employers on a number of issues, from immigration enforcement to fair employment practices to legal protections for those facing discrimination or sexual harassment.

This spring, ROC United also launched a rapid response support system — a hotline that connects people who experience or witness discrimination, harassment, or immigration enforcement to legal support and community mobilization.

Connecting to a broader movement for immigrant rights in the restaurant industry

There is an inherent tension in a movement by restaurant owners to support undocumented workers.

Nearly [1 in 3 food service workers](#) in the country are foreign-born, as are [nearly half of U.S. farm workers](#). Though data on undocumented workers is harder to track, it is [estimated](#) that about 12 percent of all food prep workers and servers are undocumented, as are 25 percent of farm laborers.

At the same time, undocumented workers are considerably more likely to be exploited by employers who pay them well below minimum wage and deny them benefits or worker protections. A [2008](#) survey of low-wage workers in New York City found that foreign-born employees were more than twice as likely as their U.S.-born counterparts to be paid below minimum wage. Undocumented women workers were the hardest hit, with 40 percent experiencing minimum wage violations.

This is why it is so crucial that the sanctuary restaurant movement be embedded within broader efforts for fair and equitable employment.

The restaurant industry is the nation's [second-largest private sector employer](#), so getting employment right for restaurant workers has huge implications for the economy as a whole. As it stands now, the sector is home to disproportionately [low wages, little-to-no benefits, and rampant wage theft](#). Many restaurant workers make a paltry \$2.13 an hour before tips — the federal "tipped" minimum wage, which has remained stagnant since 1991. Though employers are legally obligated to pay servers the difference if their tips do not at least meet the full minimum wage, enforcement is weak and underpayment common. This, in part, explains why more than [40 percent of restaurant workers](#) are living in or near poverty — twice the rate of workers outside the restaurant industry.

“We wanted to promote an expanded definition of sanctuary,” Maddali said. “When we talk about safety in the workplace, it’s not just about OSHA regulations, it’s about workers not having their families torn apart by deportation, it’s about not being discriminated against, and it’s about being paid a fair wage that doesn’t keep working families on the edge of poverty,” she added.

The sanctuary restaurant movement has its origins in ROC United’s RAISE (Restaurants Advancing Industry Standards in Employment) program, which brings together 200 “high road” employers who are working toward implementing more equitable and sustainable business practices. These practices include providing a livable wage; maintaining a healthy workplace through paid sick leave, health insurance, and paid vacation; and offering professional development for employees.

It was through a monthly call of RAISE employers that the effort to push back on the Trump administration’s anti-immigrant rhetoric was born — first through a letter to the new President and then through the mobilization of the sanctuary restaurant movement.

In addition to RAISE, ROC United leads several campaigns to make restaurant jobs more equitable, such as their ONE FAIR WAGE campaign, which seeks to eliminate the two-tiered tipped and non-tipped wage system. Seven states — Alaska, California, Oregon, Minnesota, Montana, Nevada, and Washington — have already passed legislation ensuring one fair wage.

“What we define as the ‘high road’ is a path, not a destination, and we want to help employers, and the industry as a whole, continue to develop and evolve toward more sustainable, equitable practices that are not just ethical, but pragmatic and profitable,” Maddali said.

ROC United’s sanctuary restaurant rapid response hotline can be reached by calling (424) 305-5099 or texting TABLE to 225568.