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A Better Restaurant Industry is Possible!

New DC Committee Forms to Build A Better Restaurant Industry by Passing Voter Initiative to Improve Wages and Competitiveness

WASHINGTON, DC – As DC’s restaurants, hotels, hair salons, and parking lots experience a post-pandemic boom, many laid off tipped service workers are not returning to their jobs because they don’t want to work for unfair wages with little job security or pay dignity. Now a group of service workers, concerned citizens, and business allies are launching the *DC Committee to Build a Better Restaurant Industry* with their submission of the “District of Columbia Full Minimum Wage for Tipped Workers Amendment Act of 2022” to the DC Board of Elections (DCBOE).

If approved by DC voters in 2022, the new ballot initiative would gradually phase out the sub-minimum base wage tipped workers currently receive and raise it to the same minimum wage non-tipped workers get, with tips on top. As of July 1st, the current sub-minimum wage in DC is \$5.05 an hour and if a tipped worker does not make the prevailing minimum wage of \$15.20 an hour, the employer is supposed to make up the difference. However, this system is not transparent and allows for wage theft, discrimination, and puts workers' livelihoods in the hands of the customer. Worse, during the pandemic, tipped workers saw less unemployment benefits because their income was often tied to unclaimed cash tips. Since union membership in the service sector is very low, public input on the way the service industry operates is needed to build a better and more just workplace.

The new ballot initiative is being proposed by a restaurant worker who lost their job during the pandemic and is in partnership with experienced DC ballot initiative activists who supported previous efforts to raise DC’s minimum wage, including Initiatives 76 and 77.

Initiative Proposer Ryan O’Leary has been a resident of Washington, DC for 10 years and has worked in the restaurant industry as a server. “After being laid off in the wake of the pandemic, I realized I could no longer shrug off the disrespect I experienced and witnessed while working for tips,” says O’Leary, adding “I was forced to confront how precarious our positions in the service economy truly were, how disposable we are considered to be, and how unjustly we were treated by an industry with a criminally low unionization rate, rampant wage theft, and of course, the indignity of being paid a subminimum wage.”

Paid for the DC Committee to Build a Better Restaurant Industry, Adam Eiding Treasurer 2448 Massachusetts Ave NW Washington, DC 20008. The committee is registered with the DC Office of Campaign Finance.

The Chairwoman of the new DC effort to build a better restaurant industry is Howard University Senior Aniyah Vines. Her experience in the service sector motivated her to speak out recently at a rally for higher wages in Chinatown. “I had to look for a job to help pay my tuition upon arriving in Washington, DC in 2018 to receive a higher education at Howard University. I’ve engaged people who feel powerless to demand more, but in DC - with the public’s support - I believe we can restore dignity in work by paying fair wages. I know too many individuals who feel that they have no other choice but to withstand workplace harassment to hustle for tips because they desperately need the money. Our fight is for those who are not able to fight for themselves. We are fighting for essential workers to receive an essential wage, while improving the overall experience in the workplace by putting tips on top of their wages, where they belong.”

O’Leary and Vines co-lead the DC chapter of [One Fair Wage](#), a national organization of 250,000 service workers dedicated to ending subminimum wages and making the service sector more sustainable for all. Together with [RAISE](#), a national association of 1000 ‘high road’ restaurant owners committed to increased race and gender equity in the restaurant industry, One Fair Wage is supporting the new DC ballot measure in alignment with their work co-leading efforts to pass the federal [Raise the Wage Act](#), which has been sponsored by Rep. Bobby Scott in the House and Sen. Bernie Sanders in the Senate and proposes to raise the federal minimum wage to \$15 and end the subminimum wage for tipped workers, workers with disabilities, and youth. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, and President Biden have all publicly championed the Raise the Wage Act generally and ending the subminimum wage for tipped workers specifically, with President Biden making it a part of his Executive Order for federally contracted workers and Sen. Schumer recently headlining a ‘Server for an Hour’ event in NY to underscore the need to end the subminimum wage for tipped workers.

The next step for the new initiative is for the DCBOE to consider if it is proper subject matter, which will take place within the next two months. When approved by the DCBOE for petition circulation, the campaign committee will have 180 days to collect approximately 26,000 valid signatures from DC voters by March 2022 in order to place the measure on the June 2022 Primary Election ballot. If approved by voters, the “District of Columbia Full Minimum Wage for Tipped Workers Amendment Act of 2022” would have to withstand Congressional review and possible DC Council amendments before being implemented. As proposed, tipped workers would see their first pay raise of \$1 in January 2023 and \$2 annually until 2027, when the minimum wage will be at least \$15.20 an hour (indexed to inflation), plus tips on top.

In the fall of 2018, after being approved by a 11.48% margin ([55.74% voted yes](#)) by DC voters in the June primary election, the DC Council voted to overturn Initiative 77, which also slowly phased out the sub-minimum wage. Then, seeking to stop the DC Council from overturning the legislation, “Save Our Vote” advocates collected 35,000 signatures to allow voters to reverse the DC Council decision through a referendum. On the same day the signatures were submitted to the DCBOE to place the question on the ballot, a DC Superior Court Judge intervened and declared DCBOE mishandled the referendum. Years later, the COVID pandemic further highlighted the problems associated with the sub-minimum wage leading to this new effort, which includes outreach to DC Council members to pledge to respect the outcome of the vote.

Leaders of the new effort feel that the composition of the new DC Council and the dramatic change in support among restaurant workers and employers for a full wage for tipped workers both bode well for the successful passage and implementation of the ballot measure in 2022. “A majority of the new Council supports the ballot measure and will not vote to overturn it. But more importantly, restaurant

workers have now indicated that they are no longer willing to return to work in restaurants without a full, stable wage from their employer with tips on top - meaning restaurant owners cannot fully reopen DC restaurants without raising wages, and that's led to a lot of DC restaurant owners being more supportive of policy change to create a level playing field. Policy change is essential to ensure all boats rise together and we can enjoy the DC restaurant industry at the scale we enjoyed it pre-pandemic," said Adam Eiding, who is Treasurer for the new campaign committee. A recent [report](#) by the organization One Fair Wage based on 3000 surveys of restaurant workers showed that 53% are considering leaving their restaurant jobs; 76% say it's due to low wages and tips, and 78% say they would only return to work in restaurants if given a stable, livable wage by their employer with tips on top.

The initiative text and more information on the new campaign can be found online at BetterRestaurantsDC.org

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