

The Carol and Lawrence Zicklin Center for Business Ethics Research

Research Project

Topic: **Business Ethics and Immigration: Conditions Faced by Undocumented Restaurant Workers**

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Time Frame: 2007-2008

Description: Our country is in the midst of a war on “illegal immigrants.” The national debates about what to do with the millions of “illegals” living and working in this country continues, with the dialogue focusing on what “illegal immigrants” are doing wrong and how we can stop them. The problem is that this debate, at its core, is a debate about human rights and human lives. As such, it is absolutely necessary that policymakers take into account the realities of those human lives in order to create policies that address the real issues at stake. As stated in a 2005 report released by the Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants (PICUM), “Policy makers are confronted with a lack of data concerning undocumented workers. While such information is essential to develop policies, the reality is such that policies are often elaborated in the absence of concrete data about this important social group. At the same time, undocumented workers are easy scapegoats for many ills in society and the focus of increasingly restrictive policies. There is an urgent need to reveal the realities faced by these workers, since restrictive policies do not seem to lead anywhere, but rather tend to increase tensions in society.”

The restaurant industry is a large employer of immigrant labor and, more specifically, undocumented workers. A study released in 2005 by the Restaurant Opportunities Center of New York (ROC-NY) found that 36 percent of all the workers they surveyed were undocumented – a number that they state is likely to be low because of the reluctance of some workers to reveal their immigration status. Furthermore, the restaurant employers that were interviewed for the study readily acknowledged the presence of undocumented workers in the New York restaurant industry: “All employers in our study knew or believed that undocumented workers make up at least half of the restaurant industry workforce in New York City. Many employers we spoke with acknowledged the importance of undocumented workers to the New York City restaurant industry, and some even expressed the view that if undocumented workers were removed from the industry, it would shut down. Nevertheless, employers noted that that it is easier to take advantage of an undocumented immigrant, perhaps explaining in part their concentration in more arduous, lower paying back of the house positions.”

This research will focus on exposing the conditions faced by undocumented Latino workers in the restaurant industry in Philadelphia. By collecting and analyzing testimonials from undocumented restaurant employees, we hope to reveal the realities faced by these workers in order to create an accurate portrayal of the exploitation that they experience. It is important to look at the experiences of undocumented restaurant workers, in particular, because it is these workers who most likely receive the lowest wages in the industry, work the longest hours, and face the most discrimination. A major finding of the ROC-NY study was that “workers earning low wages are less likely to receive benefits, are more likely to be exposed to poor health and safety conditions, and less likely to be provided with job or health and safety training or to

benefit from opportunities for advancement.” Using the information collected in our interviews, we can further explore these associations. We also hope to explore how the exploitation of undocumented workers is facilitated by current restaurant and government practices. Employers are able to exploit workers whom they know to be undocumented because of the vulnerable position that these workers are put in by current immigration policy and popular attitudes towards immigrants. The experiences of these workers showcase the dire need for reform within the restaurant industry and, more broadly, the need for government policies that recognize the human rights of every worker in this country.