

Testimony before the Senate Democratic Policy Committee, January 18

Adesola Ogunleye

My name is Adesola Ogunleye-Sowemimo and I am a thirty three year old black, queer multidisciplinary artist living in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. I have worked in the food industry for over seventeen years doing everything from scooping ice cream, waitressing, a hostess, business owner, event planner, and the list goes on. I was drawn to working in the industry because I grew up in a family where that's where people came together and shared with each other. Where the joy of cooking for someone and creating a nice experience for someone you cared about was better than eating the food itself. I have carried these things with me from job to job. I believe that people who work in the food industry enjoy that aspect, especially if they are working in a good work environment where they are respected and are paid fairly for their hard work. Sadly, this is not the reality. I am a hard worker who has quickly learned and moved up ranks in whatever position that I am put in. I put in what is asked of me and more to make sure that things run smoothly and goals are met in a timely manner. It is in my nature and how I was raised but a lot of times that is taken advantage of by owners. One place I worked as a manager, barista, event planner, trainer, and researcher didn't pay me a living wage even though most of my days whether at the shop or at home, were spent doing work for this owner. All he wanted was more from me and even though I discussed increasing my pay, there was always an excuse of not having enough money. In another case at a popular Philadelphian restaurant, myself and other folks were put on shifts where we might walk out with twenty dollars in our pocket. I spoke up for the workers and myself and was fired because I was "unhappy". This is the reason none of my other coworkers wanted to say anything. To just keep working their shifts, because of retribution from bosses. This is the same place where my manager touched my hair without asking and asked me if I washed my hair because she didn't understand how black hair works. Could I say anything? No, because I already spoke up about not getting paid enough and didn't want to add anything else to my plate but as you've learned already it didn't matter. I have worked at many other places as well where racism is rampant and your tips are taken away or you are put on bad shifts if you mention anything about having an uncomfortable workplace. This happened at another famous Italian company I worked for where another worker had to tell me to keep my mouth shut or I would get fired because they did not like black people. This is hard for me to do as everyone deserves to go to work, make money to survive, and not be harassed. If no one will speak up, how will anything change? So I take it upon myself to do that for folks who are too afraid to do so. It is so important that people don't have to stress themselves out working three, four, five jobs to get by to pay for meals for themselves, for their families, who have health problems and large medical bills but no health insurance and paid little to even consider paying out of pocket. With the restaurant industry, it is so easy for managers and owners to put the weight of your worthiness as a worker on how much labor you do on tips and gaslight workers into believing that they are worthless if they are complaining about poor treatment. This isn't surprising as tipping is a legacy of slavery. Us workers are still getting treated horribly, worked to the bone that we get sick, and then told we are not team players if we don't come into work. Black women feel the brunt of this because we are often very few in the industry, work hard, and paid little while our white counterparts who do less are paid more. This has happened to my mother so frequently that she taught me things to look out for as I entered the workplace. Now with COVID being a regular thing in our lives for the foreseeable future, and workers being exposed to rude customers not following safety protocols and tipping more than 80% less than pre-pandemic, it is more

important now than ever to make sure that people are getting the money they deserve to survive. That they feel comfortable and safe in their work environment, to speak up without fear of retribution, and to feel like there is a place for them to move up the ladder in the food industry to make even more money. Making sure that across Pennsylvania that we can get caught up and move our minimum wage to \$15 an hour is just the start. I know for myself I am doing what I can. I was not able to go back to my restaurant job because I am immunocompromised and that is very hard because I am also on DACA and needed to start saving money to reapply for my stay. As I've mentioned, I do what I can to help my community with whatever resources that I have, so I compiled a list of companies, restaurants, and owners who are places to avoid and are notorious for treating workers badly. It's called Be Wary, it is public and workers submitted their experiences to me. Everyone has to do their part and people need to be held accountable to their poor behavior regardless of their popularity in this city and this state. I hope you will help us as we fight for change and make livable wage a reality for Pennsylvanians and take a weight and some stress, and give us hope for survival. Thank you