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So Your Staff Wants to Unionize, Here's Why That's a Good Thing

by [John deBary](/blogs/john-debary/) — APRIL 30, 2024

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A demonstration by members of Restaurant Workers' United (RWU)

(https://plateonline.com/sites/default/files/298159845_1757346297937792_5685195307986180206_n.jpg).

s service workers we're trained to just take what comes to us and normalize it," says **Elyanna Calle**, president of **Restaurant Workers' United** (<https://www.restaurantworkersunited.org/>). (RWU), a union for



(<https://mtgad.com/www/delivery/cl.php?bannerid=15637&zoneid=6&source=sourcevar&sig=9122db34ac8211eca8df55fc236e14f9d8517fa4de162e0a8a6c262792d10741&oadest=http%3A%2F%2Fplateonline.com%2Fadvertise%2F35824%2F37014%3FHardLead%3DFalse%26CompanyId%3D814%26url%3Dhttps%253A%252F%252Fattendee.gotowebinar.com%252Fregister%252F3965834425811946586%253Fsource%253Dweb%252Bad>)

indicators of a thriving workforce. Meanwhile, restaurant industry revenue for March 2024 was **\$93.7 billion** (<https://restaurant.org/research-and-media/research/economists-notebook/economic-indicators/total-restaurant-industry-sales/>).

Calle identifies the tumult and disruption of multiple waves of COVID as a catalyst for unionization in restaurants. Lack of paid sick leave, inconsistent scheduling, low wages, and no employer-based healthcare were key motivating factors leading to the establishment of RWU.

The owners of Via 313 responded vehemently against the union drive, establishing [a website](https://www.via313knowtovote.com/our-position) (<https://www.via313knowtovote.com/our-position>), detailing their stance against the union—that it believes a “union would not be advantageous for our associates, our customers, our communities, or the economic growth on which we all depend.” According to that site, two out of three union votes failed with the third election pending. RWU has filed a complaint with the National Labor Relations Board alleging union busting, specifically for withholding raises in alleged retaliation for the union push.

Against the backdrop of capitalism, the actions of Via 313’s owners are not entirely unreasonable. However, there is a case to be made that opposition to unions on the part of owners and management represents a lack of long-term thinking and misplaced priorities.

“A restaurant and bar professionals. Calle established RWU amid the effort to unionize pizza restaurant **Via 313**’s three locations in Austin, Texas. “Many people still view the service industry as ‘low-skilled labor.’ You talk to people in these industries and they’re like, ‘Yeah, I don’t get paid time off. I don’t have good healthcare. I make a low hourly wage. But that’s just how it is.’”

Only 1.4 percent of restaurant and food service workers belong to a union, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, while the national average hovers around 10 percent. Meanwhile, turnover rate for restaurant staff fluctuates around 75 percent, meaning only about one-quarter of restaurant staff stay at the same job for more than a year. Additionally, the national mean annual wage for restaurant cooks and servers is roughly \$36,000, about \$24,000 less than the national mean wage for all workers. These are not

“People form unions at jobs they want to stay in,” says **Andy Parkinson**, a bartender and graduate student at the **CUNY School of Labor and Urban Studies** who is doing his capstone project on union efforts in New York City bars and restaurants, including the recently failed effort at East Village cocktail bar, **Death & Co** (<https://punchdrink.com/articles/bars-unionization-death-co/>). “It’s almost a paradox that the places that are more ripe [for unionization] are sometimes better places to work that also have some glaring issues that need to be sorted out. If you don’t like where you work at all, you should find another job. But if you see the value where you are, you should want to make it a better place. You should want a seat at the table.”

While it seems counterintuitive to see a union push as the result of generally good working conditions, it’s a sentiment echoed by workers, including **Marc Rizzuto**, the Death & Co. bartender who led the union push. “I’ve worked for a lot of places that weren’t great and [I had] a year, year and a half shelf life. I’ve been here for three years now, and I don’t see myself going anywhere because it is the best,” he says.

Rizzuto saw unionization as a way to ensure that his coworkers had a voice and that their concerns, such as facility maintenance, communication about scheduling and tip pool changes, and preservation of the bar’s culture amidst a growing parent company, were addressed. Rizzuto says that although their vote recently failed, he’s committed to continuing the effort to form a union for Death & Co. workers.

According to **Ted Pappageorge**, secretary-treasurer of the **Culinary Workers Union** Local 226 in Las Vegas, an affiliate of UNITE HERE (<https://unitehere.org/>), “there are a lot of benefits for companies to sit down and talk to their workers.” Key among them is attracting and keeping talented workers. In an industry with high turnover rate, employee retention can make a huge difference in a business’ bottom line. According to the Center for Hospitality Research at Cornell, (<https://modernrestaurantmanagement.com/what-is-the-real-cost-of-restaurant-employee-turnover/>), losing a front-line employee can cost on average \$5,864.

Calle asserts that workers want to form unions because they care about the place where they work “because if they didn’t they would just go somewhere else.” Her advice is to think of it as a good thing that the people working to keep the business alive want a say. Ultimately, without workers, “you have nothing,” she says. For Calle and other pro-union advocates, a thriving workforce means a thriving business. “[It] is going to improve your food quality, your wait time, your customer retention, all of these things.”

It’s easy to frame a worker union push as an adversarial us-versus-them situation, but zero-sum thinking is often misaligned with our morals. In an industry with such poor conditions, a business is only as healthy as its workers. As more and more workers in the restaurant industry push to unionize, employers are naturally pushing back. But there is another option: voluntary acceptance of the union. **José Andrés’** restaurant group recently voluntarily recognized a union at their Washington D.C. restaurant, **The Bazaar** (<https://news.bloomberglaw.com/daily-labor-report/celebrity-chef-jose-andres-recognizes-union->

[at-dc-restaurant](#)). There are plenty of examples of heavily unionized industries that thrive. Take, for instance, the film and TV industry. A union push is a sign that employees want to stay and invest in the long term health of their workplace; embracing it can be a good business move.

But aside from that, isn't it just the right thing to do?

John deBary (/blogs/john-debary)

John deBary is a bar expert, author, and consultant with over a decade of experience in New York City hospitality. He's a judge for the **L.A. Spirits Awards** (<https://www.laspiritsawards.com/>) and was named one of **Wine Enthusiast's 40 under 40 in 2020** (<https://www.winemag.com/content/40-under-40-2020-john-debary/>). He's also a co-founder and board president of **Restaurant Workers' Community Foundation** (<https://www.restaurantworkerscf.org/>), an organization dedicated to supporting structural solutions to the quality-of-life crisis facing workers in the hospitality industry.



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Becky H. replied on May 5, 2024 [PERMALINK \(/COMMENT/70553#COMMENT-70553\)](#)

Nice to see an article that's not just union bashing fear monger if

Becky H. replied on May 5, 2024 [PERMALINK \(/COMMENT/70554#COMMENT-70554\)](#)

Nice to see any article that's not just union bashing fear mongering. Unions remind businesses that the workers are the reason the business keeps running in the first place, and every restaurant knows the drain that constant turnover causes. Unions maintain a balance of power in the workplace. If you are worried about being negotiated out of business, being more open about the financial reality of your operation can ensure that everyone is at the table with reasonable expectations. Unions can help create a secure environment for your employees, which encourages them to grow and improve.



