

Monday, September 17, 2018

Testimony AGAINST

Bill 22-913, Tipped Wage Workers Fairness Amendment Act of 2018

By

Woong Chang

Good morning, Chairman Mendelson and councilmembers. My name is Woong Chang, and I've been living and working as a tipped worker in DC since 2009. I'm here today, not only as a restaurant worker but also as a deeply concerned citizen, to urge the city council to respect the will of the voters and vote no on this preposterous bill named, "Tipped Wage Workers Fairness Amendment Act of 2018". I wish I could start today by thanking you all for holding this public hearing, but the truth of the matter is that this is a hearing that shouldn't even be happening in the first place. We are gathered here today to discuss whether our elected officials should overturn the result of a democratic election—the exact same election where you were voted into the office. I surely hope that you notice the unbelievable level of hypocrisy here. As a tipped worker, I'm extremely disappointed, and as a citizen of DC, I am outraged by this despicable abuse of power.

Let's be crystal clear on something here. At the CORE of your job, as an elected official, is to be the voice of the people you represent. By repealing this initiative, you are violating the most essential part of your job responsibility and going directly against the will of the people whom you are supposed to represent. I would consider that gross incompetence and consider anyone who votes for this bill to be unfit to be an elected official. Please do not forget who you work for in the first place.

I'm personally having a hard time understanding why we are still discussing the merits of this initiative today. We've had this discussion many times before today. We've debated, argued, and disagreed already. At the end of all of this, in clear and definitive terms, the voters of DC have spoken. 7 out of 8 wards voted in favor of Initiative 77. We, your constituents, have decided that we should eliminate the tipped minimum wage. The citizens have spoken, and your job, as our democratically elected officials, is to carry out the will of the voters, PERIOD. We should be having a conversation about how to implement this initiative effectively. Instead, we are still discussing the initiative itself. That time has passed. We've been there and done that.

You've seen and heard every story, statistic, and data (both anecdotal and scientific).

I could sit here today and tell you all about my experience as a tipped worker on the West Coast, and how the restaurant industry is thriving despite this doomsday scenario that the opposition paints. But, you've heard that before.

I could tell you about how every pay period, I got a \$300-\$400 paycheck in CA, but here in DC, I receive a check that says "This is not a check" with a fat zero. But, I'm sure you've heard that before too.

I could tell you that this initiative is really meant for the bottom quartile tipped workers, mostly support staff like busser, barbacks, and polishers, in the restaurants who are not here today because they are busy working 2 or 3 jobs. Also, as the most marginalized sector of the industry, they have a lot of fear coming out publicly in support. But, I'm sure you've heard that too.

But, here's something that I haven't heard much. In fact, this is why I'm fighting for the elimination of tipped minimum wage. My dream, ever since I started in the restaurant industry, has been to see the day that my industry is "professionalized". Not that education is everything, but I graduated from a prestigious university with a degree in Neuroscience. I could've gone into many other professions that are more socially respected. Yet, I chose to work in restaurants. This is my chosen profession. This is what I love to do and this is what I am passionate about. I have no doubt in my mind that every single restaurant worker who is here today to testify regardless on which side of the issue they stand, is incredibly passionate about this industry. You simply will not last long term without the love and passion for this industry. Despite this passion, love, and work that we put in, I can't tell you how many times I've heard things like:

"What do you want to do when you grow up?"

"So, what do you really want to do?"

"I'm sure you surely don't want to work in restaurants all your life."

These are from guests, but I've also heard from employer and management:

"If you don't like it, get out of my restaurant. I can get some other server for super cheap."

"What do I care if I keep you here for 8 hours? You don't cost me anything."

"You are the cheapest labor in the restaurant. If it were up to me, I would have you clean the bathroom too."

For me, this issue goes beyond just an economic issue. It's a matter of human dignity and professional respect. As long as we are paid \$3.89/hr, we'll always be treated like we are worth \$3.89/hr because we are worth \$3.89/hr.

In conclusion, I would just like to close by saying thank you to 5 councilmembers who have not signed onto this ridiculous bill that I consider a direct attack on our democracy and a huge disrespect to voters. And, I would like to remind the other 7 councilmembers that it should be an honor and a privilege to serve and represent the public. Just because you have the power to repeal does not mean you should. Please do the job that you were sent here to do and represent the will of the people who sent you here in the first place. Please do not disrespect us the voters. Thank you.