We’re in restaurants a lot. The average adult eats out four to five times a week; as a nation, we spend 47 percent of our food budgets dining out. And with more than 13 million people in the industry’s workforce, 1 in 12 Americans has worked in a restaurant. That’s why people think they’re pretty familiar with the restaurant industry. Until, that is, you find out that of the country’s 10 lowest-paying jobs, six of them are restaurant jobs. Servers use food stamps at twice the rate of the rest of the U.S. workforce and are three times as likely to live in poverty. And while it’s important that people can turn to public support programs during challenging times, these programs certainly weren’t designed to be permanent wage subsidies or part of the business strategy for employers. Compounding the problem of widespread low wages, the restaurant industry is one of the only (and certainly largest) economic sector that uses tips as way to force customers to pay a significant segment of it’s workforce’s wages. The subminimum wage at the federal level has been $2.13 an hour since 1991, and is below the regular minimum wage in 43 states. Instead of getting paid a stable, base wage directly by their employer, servers are forced to curry favor with each new customer, over and over again, in order to stand a chance of seeing any take-home pay. And although employers are legally required to pay the full minimum wage when tips don’t add up, enforcement is weak and disorganized, resulting in widespread wage theft. According to a report from the Economic Policy Institute, the federal government employed only one workplace inspector for every 141,000 workers in 2008. That meant the average employer had a .001 percent chance of being investigated in a given year. The two-tiered wage system is broken.

Fortunately, ROC is committed to fixing it by fighting for living wages for all restaurant workers, but we’ll need everyone’s help.

First, speak up every time you dine out. Restaurant owners need to know that wages and labor practices are important to you as a consumer. You can use our Diners Guide App to find “high road” restaurants in your area, but most importantly, you should encourage all restaurant owners to do the right by their employees.

Second, get to know the folks bringing food to your table. Extend your conversation to include them: How long have they been in the industry? Are they supporting a family? What’s the craziest thing that ever happened to them at work? If you’re a seasoned veteran, or did a stint of waiting tables in college, you should share your story at livingofftips.com.

Finally, support ONE FAIR WAGE. There will be growing attention on initiatives that do more than raise the abysmally low tipped minimum wage, but eliminate it entirely -- and require all employers to directly pay their employees at least one, fair minimum wage.

Maria Myotte
Restaurant Opportunities Center United