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Upscale Korean BBQ Restaurant Genwa Stole Millions from Workers

*For years, restaurant owners surreptitiously shaved time, denied workers
meal and rest breaks.*

Restaurant workers come together to make change.

LOS ANGELES-- Today, the State of California Labor Commissioner's Office announced that it has cited and fined Genwa Korean BBQ over \$2 million for labor code violations.

Through conversations with the workers, KIWA--a worker center in central Los Angeles--discovered that Genwa was committing high levels of wage theft. An investigation by the State of California Labor Commissioner's Office found that for years, Genwa Korean BBQ, a high-end restaurant with locations in Mid Wilshire, Beverly Hills, and DTLA, had illegally short-changed their workers. The Labor Commissioner's Office has cited the Beverly Hills and Wilshire Genwa locations, along with owners Jin Won Kwon and Jay B. Kwon, for \$2,063,041.01 in unpaid wages and penalties.

Jenny Kim, a former server at the mid-Wilshire Genwa, said, "When I first started to work at Genwa it was like a family to me. It smelled and felt like home! We worked so hard, even when it was dangerous. We did everything for the customers we loved, and who loved us back. The customers loved the food. When it seemed like we were being shorted and our money was being stolen, I tried to talk to my manager. I was told to stop digging into it and not to say anything--that staying silent was for my own good. I had seen a lot of things that didn't feel right, and now I knew it wasn't right. I felt scared and really sad. How could they know our money was being stolen and just let it happen? They knew how hard we worked. The place I thought was home to me now felt strange and dark."

In addition to addressing wage theft, workers have been organizing for improvements on the job. Genwa workers won a \$2.25 wage increase for back-of-the-house workers at the Beverly Hills restaurant, bringing them to parity with the Los Angeles restaurants. They also won a demand for ventilation systems to reduce temperatures in the extremely hot kitchens. The workers continue to call for a fair and transparent tip system, fair schedules, and greater respect at the workplace.

"Our economy today is unfair. This problem goes beyond just one restaurant. White-collar criminals can get away with stealing millions while servers, bussers, and dishwashers who work

hard on their feet all night carrying heavy trays aren't even getting their overtime pay and breaks. More and more, workers are standing together to make change, even in small retail shops and Ktown BBQ restaurants. We hope to see the organizing at Genwa spread throughout the Koreatown and Los Angeles restaurant industry. Immigrant workers have rights, too, and today they are speaking out," said Alexandra Suh, Executive Director of KIWA.

Hector Sosa has worked as a dishwasher at Genwa in Beverly Hills for the past six years. He said "I once had a job cutting down trees on a ranch with a sharp chainsaw. Before that, I worked at a huge factory for sixteen years, where, each day for ten hours, I applied paraffin oil to thread that would get woven into textiles. I've never had an easy job, but dishwashing is the heaviest, hardest job I have ever had. Going home on the bus at night, you can smell the food on restaurant workers' clothes. I am a Christian and it is my personal ethic to do my best. I love Los Angeles, where there are so many different people and you can encounter every type of food. I wish all the workers, including the Latino workers, were respected by the management of Genwa. I have given six years of hard work to Genwa. My coworkers and I want to be treated as equals. We want to feel that our contributions to Genwa's success are valued."

Working with lawyers from Bet Tzedek, a dozen former Genwa workers have also filed claims for wage violations and unpaid tips. These claims are in addition to the \$2 million in citations, and amount to several hundred thousand dollars. Sebastian Sanchez, a lawyer at Bet Tzedek, said "Wage theft continues to be a pervasive problem throughout all industries. In workplaces where there are low-wage and immigrant workers, the problem is even more acute. It is crucial for workers to advocate for themselves and let organizations like KIWA and Bet Tzedek know about the violations in their workplaces. When workers unite, change happens and employers pay for their actions. Bet Tzedek is proud to support the Genwa workers and KIWA in their campaign to improve conditions for workers in the restaurant industry and beyond."

When Genwa Korean BBQ opened, Steven Chung was the first employee hired. "I poured my heart into my job. And at first it was very cool. All the employees would hang out together and it was a tight-knit, family vibe." When workers began to suspect wage theft, many spoke to Steven. "Bussers would tell me, 'I feel like I'm missing my hours.' It happened to me too--the paychecks didn't seem to match the hours I worked. At first I thought it was just accounting errors but it kept happening and I knew it was more than that. I became convinced it was not a mistake. I believe they were intentionally cutting time off of people's paychecks." Jeannie Kwon, the owner who had hired him over five years before, told him it was time to go on a vacation. "I thought she would call me back. But I found out that the very next day she told everyone that she had fired me. After more than five years of hard work--over five years of truly caring for the restaurant and for the people in it, I felt betrayed."

According to the UCLA Labor Center, Los Angeles workers in low-wage jobs lose an estimated \$1.4 billion to wage theft every year. Statewide, the loss is even more staggering. As a result of these injustices, working people in low-wage jobs and their families, a majority of whom are immigrants and/or people of color, experience health problems and face food and housing

insecurity. In Los Angeles, 80% of workers in low-wage jobs do not get their overtime pay. Eighty per cent do not receive their meal and rest breaks. And 78% of tipped workers experience tip-stealing by management.

In Los Angeles, businesses like markets, restaurants, carwashes, and garment factories dominate the economy, providing over 50% of the jobs. KIWA has focused on organizing workers in the restaurant and retail industries. KIWA seeks to amplify the voice of workers and residents to contribute to the social, cultural, and economic development of their neighborhoods.

Steven Chung said, "I know what it is like to work at a restaurant where workers are earning a decent wage and happy to be there--because that's how Genwa was for me in the beginning. Workers are key to a successful restaurant, and we can help create better workplaces for everyone. I would like to see that at Genwa."

Jenny Kim, the former Genwa worker, said, "Restaurant workers want to come to work excited. We want to show our love for our customers. We want to meet with the owners to discuss how to create better restaurants. We can make it happen together."

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KIWA is a Los Angeles-based worker center that combines organizing, leadership development, and policy change in order to improve the lives of immigrant workers in low-wage industries and build a foundation for social and economic justice.