

VIEWPOINTS

Austin American-Statesman

Susie Gray
Publisher

Debbie Hiott
Editor

John Bridges
Managing Editor

Juan Castillo
Viewpoints
Editor

Alberta Phillips,
Gissela SantaCruz
Viewpoints Writers

OTHERS SAY ADAM ORMAN
Special Contributor

Diners should know cost of low wages, factory farms

I recently interviewed a bartender from Denver for a position at L'Oca d'Oro, the Italian restaurant I co-own. When she moved, she had no idea she'd be taking an \$8,000 annual pay cut. This is the effect of the two-tiered wage system for tipped employees — and why L'Oca d'Oro and restaurants nationwide are in favor of One Fair Wage, a movement for fair pay in the service industry.

In Colorado, the subminimum wage is \$6.28 per hour. In Texas, along with 23 other states that pay under \$3 an hour, tipped employees make \$2.13 an hour.

The tipped minimum wage started during Reconstruction as a way to “pay” ex-slaves. Pullman porters and other service employees were paid no base wage but were allowed to receive tips. By 1991, the \$0 per hour base wage had inched up to \$2.13 per hour, or 50 percent of the federal minimum wage.

In 1996, Bill Clinton signed the ironically titled Minimum Wage Increase Act, separating the tipped minimum from the federal minimum wage. This froze the tipped wage at \$2.13 per hour, where it remains. The 2013 Minimum Wage Fairness Act sought to reconnect the two wages and guaranteed that the tipped wage would rise to 70 percent of the federal minimum wage, but Congress never voted on the bill.

As a restaurant owner, I must ensure that our tipped employees make at least \$7.25 an hour. If I fail, the burden falls to the employee to make sure that the restaurant makes up any difference. This system leads to hundreds of thousands of dollars in unpaid wage claims every year.

Many underpaid restaurant workers are undocumented and have little recourse. Seventy percent of them are women and, notably, restaurants are the source of more sexual harassment claims than any other industry, according to a 2014 study by the Restaurant Opportunity Centers United, a labor organization. This makes sense. Working for tips means you are working for the customer — and employers have little incentive to side with their expendable \$2.13-an-hour employees.

Seven states pay One Fair



All L'Oca d'Oro employees are paid at least \$8 an hour. Staff splits a 20 percent pretax service charge. TAMIR KALIFA/AMERICAN-STATESMAN

Wage, meaning they do not allow a subminimum option. While Texas is not one of them, L'Oca d'Oro, Black Star Co-Op and a few other restaurants voluntarily pay all employees at least the federal minimum wage. In March, I traveled with other restaurant owners to Washington, D.C., to lobby for One Fair Wage with Restaurant Opportunities Centers United and learned that there is no one way for every restaurant to tackle this yet.

At L'Oca d'Oro, we pay everyone in the restaurant at least \$8 an hour. We include a 20 percent pretax service charge. All kitchen and waitstaff share in those tips. In order to compensate our whole staff equitably, the service charge has to be mandatory, because another law requires that voluntary tips stay with front-of-house staff.

Oddly, the IRS provides a tax break — the FICA Tip Tax Credit — to restaurants for the voluntary tips that are paid out. For going along with tradition, restaurants that only pay the subminimum wage and don't share tips with their kitchen staffs win this annual federal bonus — a tax break that amounts to tens of thousands of dollars.

At one end of the industry, the National Restaurant Association, representing all the national chains who walked the halls of Congress with us in March, marked by their Dunkin' Donuts and Buffalo Wild Wings lapel pins, lobbies for low wages and unregulated factory farms to keep costs down. The lobby for ethical

restaurants is not yet so robust.

Low wages and the absurdly low cost of food from factory farms are what makes it possible for most folks to go out to eat at all. But there are hidden costs on both sides of this equation. On the agriculture side, we pay an environmental cost for the groundwater that is polluted by fertilizer and animal waste. We pay with our lives when there are outbreaks of mad cow, listeria and bird flu. On the labor side, we all help support \$2.13-an-hour employees who can't afford health insurance and are on food stamps and welfare.

We'd like to see the city of Austin create an awards system for restaurants with higher standards. We'd like to see a Central Texas independent restaurant association established to raise the profile of restaurants that are breaking ground in the areas of zero-waste, local sourcing and labor policy.

For decades, restaurants and sustainability advocates have been waging the battle against factory farming and for organically produced, seasonal food. There is much less written about the labor side of the restaurant industry.

When consumers understand more about how their cooks and servers are being compensated, this should pressure restaurants to raise their standards and put Austin at the progressive end of the national curve — where we belong.

Orman is a managing partner of L'Oca d'Oro.

DANA SUMMERS TRIBUNE CONTENT AGENCY



YOU SAY LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Texas Republicans not trying to fix health care

Re: July 29 article, “What Texans in Congress had to say about the Senate health care vote.”

So, U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz is worried about all the people being hurt by Obamacare. Are these the same people who were worried they would lose their health care if the Republican bill passed?

Rep. Lamar Smith wants to replace with legislation that “lowers premiums, lowers taxes and makes better health care accessible to all.” If he has such a plan, why didn't he put it forward? U.S. Sen. John Cornyn says, “Texans are counting on us to free them from Obamacare mandates.” I don't think so. I don't think we're counting on you for anything but more turmoil and lousy bills.

If you take politics and profit out of the equation, a health care plan isn't that complicated. My canasta club came up with one in 15 minutes. Would you like to see it?

ROSAYN CURRY, AUSTIN

Maybe we should drop car insurance mandate

Sen. Ted Cruz makes an important point regarding the Republican effort to repeal the Affordable Care Act. He, and seemingly most Republicans, cite the people being hurt by the ACA.

They don't care about the millions helped by the ACA. Their concern is about the right of people to make choices that adversely affect the cost of health care for those that need it now.

If the mandate to buy health insurance is so bad, let's drop the mandate that drivers must have auto insurance. What's the difference?

JOHN COLLIER, CEDAR PARK

Don't like gas tax? Look at Houston

Re: July 28 article, “TxDOT reconsiders plan for U.S. 183 toll lanes.”

For those who support politicians afraid to raise the gas tax, take a drive to Houston. It's a nightmare. Each toll road has caveats that must be read at 70 mph. The mix of tolls, HOV lanes and free roads become a danger of confusion. All could

be solved by clean freeways, paid with the gas tax.

For those who support less regulation by city government, look around at Houston while you're there. The city's path to growth was made possible through a lack of zoning — and was successful beyond imagination. The result is one of the ugliest and unlivable places in Texas for residents outside the city's inner loop.

It's not too late for Austin. Let's design the entire city for maximum livability.

MICHAEL HOVIS,
WEST LAKE HILLS

Lots of service members have medical expenses

Many people are upset that Donald Trump proposed banning transgender people from serving in the military. What is wrong with this? Why should the American public pay for these people's medical bills? Just because they have expertise that serves the military well and makes America more secure?

While we're at it, let's ban pregnant or fertile women, so we don't have to pay their medical bills. And if a soldier gets cancer, discharge them.

Better yet — why don't these service members pay their own medical bills instead of leaching off the U.S. taxpayer?

JAMES OBERKROM, AUSTIN

Government health care isn't just for the poor

We all know folks who do not want health care provided by the government.

“It's socialism.” “It's for lazy people who won't work.” “The government has no business being in health care.” We have all heard the thinking.

It doesn't matter to these folks that a lot of Americans cannot afford hundreds of dollars a month for health care for themselves and their children. There is a simple remedy for those who do not want government involved in their health care: Show us you really mean it by sending in your Medicare and Veterans Affairs card to the government.

You do not have to have Medicare; it is your choice. You are free to go out on the “free” market and buy any health insurance you want. So, now the problem is fixed.

JIM DENTON, GATESVILLE

OTHERS SAY JOSEPH DARDA
Special Contributor

How America learned to stop worrying and love the drone

This summer, Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg announced the successful test flight of a solar-powered drone that could one day deliver worldwide internet access. He lamented on his personal Facebook page that “more than half the world's population — 4 billion people — still can't access the internet” and suggested that the drone could be what makes the internet a universal right.

Days later, the Pentagon issued an email statement revealing that it had carried out a drone strike in Somalia against the al-Shabab extremist group. Zuckerberg's announcement ricocheted across the internet, generating excited chatter on business and tech websites, while the Pentagon's muted statement vanished from the headlines within hours.

For years, the Obama administration was assailed from the right and the left for its overreliance on — and lack of disclosures regarding — lethal drone strikes in Afghanistan, Libya and Pakistan. Under President Donald Trump, the rate of air strikes has increased, though he has not faced the same kind of resistance that his predecessor had. This is in part because Trump is giving progressives other programs and policies to oppose. But it is also because Americans have grown accustomed to seeing drones used in business, from telecommunica-

tions manufacturers like Qualcomm to fast-food restaurants like Domino's.

The commercial use of drones has reframed the unmanned aircraft as a humanitarian and consumer good rather than an instrument of war. Drones may soon deliver internet access to Uganda and pizza to our doors, but we should not let their benign uses distract us from their deadly ones.

The CIA, in collaboration with the Air Force, executed the first lethal drone strike on Oct. 7, 2001 — the first day of the war in Afghanistan. It would be the first of thousands, as Predator and Reaper drones armed with Hellfire missiles emerged as chilling icons of the war on terror.

When President Barack Obama signed a new Presidential Policy Guidance that imposed modest limits on the drone program, he had to fend off a public protest from antiwar activist Medea Benjamin. From the audience, she reminded the president of the death of Abdulrahman al-Awlaki, a 16-year-old American killed by a CIA drone strike in Yemen, and asked, “Is that the way we treat a 16-year-old American? Can you tell us why Abdulrahman al-Awlaki was killed? Can you tell the Muslim people their lives are as precious as our lives?”

Trump has not met that kind of challenge because he has

never addressed his administration's use of armed drones in public. With the president's attention and tweets directed elsewhere, lethal drone strikes in Somalia and Yemen have been overshadowed by stories about drones as life-saving couriers of defibrillators in the United States and humanitarian aid in Rwanda and tools for catching Elephant poachers in Malawi.

The conversation has shifted from the Pentagon and Langley to Silicon Valley, where engineers and executives have refashioned the drone for a consumer market. That has meant shedding the image of the killer drone and substituting it with something less threatening — something fun, safe and in the service of the greater good.

Of course, with the right oversight, drones can do a lot of good in the world, as Zuckerberg and others suggest. However, their commercial use at home risks distracting us from what they were designed to do, in our name, in the Middle East and Africa.

Trump may be silent on his administration's drone program in Somalia and Yemen, but we should not let his silence determine ours.

Darda is an assistant professor of English and comparative race and ethnic studies at Texas Christian University.



Dozens of people march outside the Renaissance Austin Hotel last month to protest Sen. Ted Cruz's stand on health care reform. Cruz was speaking at the hotel. JAY JANNER/AMERICAN-STATESMAN

BE A PART OF THE DISCUSSION

The Austin American-Statesman encourages feedback from readers. Please include a full name, address and daytime and evening phone numbers. We edit letters for brevity, grammar, style and clarity. Edited letters address a single idea and do not exceed 150 words. Anonymous letters will not be published. Letters become property of the Austin American-Statesman.

SUBMIT A LETTER
letters@statesman.com

MAIL
Letters to the Editor, P.O. Box 670, Austin, TX 78767.

COMMENTARY SUBMISSIONS
views@statesman.com

THE EDITORIAL BOARD BLOG
viewpoints.blog.statesman.com

TWITTER
@aasviewpoints

PHONE
512-445-1776