

State estimated to have lost 15 percent of its restaurants

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Wisconsin has lost some 15 percent of its restaurants over the course of the pandemic, based on the latest figures gathered by the Wisconsin Restaurant Association.

“When you lose 22 percent of your workforce, it is a difficult thing to backfill,” WRA CEO Kristine Hillmer said yesterday during WisPolitics.com luncheon in Madison. “That’s why you’re seeing reduced hours, or reduced days of the week they’re open — because they’re trying not to burn out the staff that they have.”

She explained many restaurants are making do with fewer staff members, as the industry has been sluggish to rebound amid the ongoing pandemic. She noted wages have been on the rise, added that “you cannot find a dishwasher for under \$17 an hour” in Milwaukee.

“That’s an unskilled position and they can’t even get applicants,” she said.

Wisconsin State AFL-CIO President Stephanie Bloomingdale countered that “these are essential jobs to the industry ... they ought to be able to make a living wage too.” She cited a recent MIT report that found a family of four living in Wisconsin needs both heads of household to each earn \$22 per hour to “just make it.”

Michael Childers, a professor in UW-Madison’s Wisconsin School of Business, explained that workers “at the lower end” of the job market are in a better financial

position now due to stimulus payments and other factors.

“That provided people the opportunity, as both of my colleagues said, to reassess. What are my other options out here? What can I do?” he said. “That’s created sort of this vicious circle or virtuous cycle — I guess whichever way you’re seeing it from — but this opportunity for workers to be more selective.”

Bloomingdale noted many workers in the restaurant industry have struggled to make ends meet, and the pandemic provided them a chance to reassess their options and value to their employers.

“We’re looking for a reset, because it’s been far too long that that is off-kilter,” she said.

She said more workers are now looking to organize, pointing to the recent example of Starbucks workers in Buffalo, New York voting to form a union. It’s the first to do so among thousands of locations owned by the international coffeehouse chain. Panelists also highlighted employees of Milwaukee-based Collectivo Coffee forming a union.

“They are in the midst of their first contract right now, and they worked really hard to organize their union,” Bloomingdale said. “We wish them much success.”

Listen to audio from the event here: <https://bit.ly/3s6K7MM>

-By Alex Moe