

Protesters pressure restaurant

Letter alleges woman was not paid for subcontracted work

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Drew Austin (right) of Cedar Rapids shouts protest chants with Chris Heffner of Coralville at Outback Steakhouse in Cedar Rapids, Iowa on Wednesday, May 14, 2014. Several dozens of people protested for Kossiwa Agbenowossi, who accused the restaurant chain for delaying her pay. (Justin Wan/The Gazette-KCRG TV9)

CEDAR RAPIDS — A group of roughly 60 protesters marched into the Cedar Rapids Outback Steakhouse last night demanding the restaurant pay an employee subcontracted to clean the now-closed Coralville location.

The protest, which was organized by the [Center for Worker Justice of Eastern Iowa](#) based in Iowa City, later flowed out to the grass in front of the restaurant, at 3939 First Ave. SE, shortly after 6 p.m.

Misty Rebik, executive director of the Center for Worker Justice of Eastern Iowa, said she planned the protest because Kossiwa Agbenowossi, a 38-year-old Coralville resident who previously worked at the now-closed Coralville Outback Steakhouse, is owed 49 days of pay.

Agbenowossi says she was cleaning the restaurant's Coralville location through a subcontractor but that, after she left on her own accord in August, the subcontractor did not pay her for 49 days of work. The Center for Worker Justice claims Agbenowossi is owed \$2,346 in unpaid wages.

Agbenowossi, who is originally from Togo in western Africa, said it felt “very good” to have support last night and that, in the end, she wants the money she says she is owed.

Rebik said the Center for Worker Justice has tried to get Agbenowossi’s money from the subcontractor with no success, and now, because the Outback Steakhouse in Cedar Rapids is supposedly using the same subcontractor to clean its restaurant, the group is pressuring Outback to make sure Agbenowossi gets her pay.

“Today we are here to demand that the Outback pay Kossiwa for the work that she did at the Outback Steakhouse and that the Outback end the contract with this shady, fly-by-night cleaning contractor,” Rebik said, reading from a letter she later gave to the restaurant’s manager. “Our community will not tolerate a business model that robs workers of their wages, and undermines good business practices.”

Mark Horlocker, managing partner at the Cedar Rapids Outback Steakhouse, said that he had passed the issue on to corporate.

“I have no comment on all of this. I have passed it up for further investigation,” Horlocker said after the group handed him the letter. “You’re frustrated with this situation as much as I am and I wish that you could get paid, I wish that I could help you out, but this is out of my jurisdiction at this point. I have passed this up to upper management and corporate and they are in the process of investigating.”

Horlocker said he was investigating issues with the subcontractor and he was not permitted to comment further.

He directed all further questions to the restaurant’s chief legal officer, Joseph Kadow.

Kadow could not be reached immediately for comment last night.

The protesters were joined by state Rep. Art Staed, D-Cedar Rapids, who said he personally has called the restaurant’s corporate offices.

He added that a wage theft bill — which **died in a funnel in March** — will be introduced again next year.

“House Democrats will bring that up every chance we can. We’re going to continue to bring that up because wage theft is absolutely wrong,” Staed said, as he stood among protesters. “Who would be in favor of wage theft? This should not be happening to anyone, anywhere.”