

Minneapolis Star and Tribune: Impact of ICE on restaurants: 2 articles

ICE is leaving but the restaurant industry's problems run deep

Post-Operation Metro Surge, restaurant workers are looking for guarantees of security and financial help.

[By Joy Summers](#)

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As restaurant workers geared up for the Valentine's Day weekend, traditionally the biggest dining-out night of the year, they put the word out that their industry needs help.

On Friday morning, organizers from [Restaurant Opportunities Center of Minnesota](#) (ROC MN) and Centro de Trabajadores Unidos En La Lucha (CTUL) held a news conference outside of [Hospitality Minnesota's](#) offices in downtown Minneapolis announcing a campaign called [86ICE](#).

The groups, which advocate for fair workplace conditions, demanded that restaurants create long-term safety plans meant to protect against any return of immigration enforcement agents. Specifically, they want the right to deny ICE access to private areas without a valid judicial warrant, license to refuse service to known ICE or federal agents and permission to take time off if workers don't feel safe without fear of workplace repercussions.

No one was at the Hospitality Minnesota offices to receive the list of demands. The nonprofit advocacy organization for the hospitality industry works remotely on Fridays.

Prior to ROC MN and CTUL's press conference, Hospitality Minnesota issued [a statement](#) on Feb. 12 expressing relief at the news that Operation Metro Surge was ending, but urged officials for more action. The group noted businesses reporting millions of dollars in losses each week and called for a "comprehensive set of relief measures for the hospitality sector."

The group asked lawmakers to provide meaningful relief and fair policies to sustain the industry and retain employment. "Our businesses don't want handouts. They want fair policies that will allow them to be successful on merit. Low-hanging fruits such as a sales tax holiday, allowing hospitality to charge reasonable, transparent service charges, and prohibiting credit card processors from collecting a fee on tips and taxes are just some easy targets."

Speaking on behalf of restaurant owners at the news conference, Miguel Hernandez of Lito's Burritos and Lito's on Lake acknowledged that many are already doing what they can to protect employees. "In the past couple of months, I've seen the amazing amount of effort and care from those who have stepped up," Hernandez said. "Why not demand Hospitality Minnesota stand up for these restaurant owners and stand by these workers?"

Hernandez urged other restaurant owners to commit to the demands in 86ICE, noting that despite the reported drawdown, ICE agents will continue to operate in the state.

Minneapolis bartender Remy Aaron Mistral spoke about the toll the last two months have taken on workers as well as the emotional and economic impact. "It's not sustainable that we keep living on the front lines of devastating historical events."

Meanwhile, grassroots efforts providing economic and other industry support continue to emerge. The recently launched [Salt Cure Fund](#), spearheaded by local restaurant journalist Stephanie March in partnership with the Minneapolis Foundation, just announced a \$1 million goal for National Day of Giving on Feb. 18.

Restaurants and businesses nationwide are invited to show support by donating a portion of their proceeds or guest donations. Individuals can donate directly as well. The effort will raise funds to provide critical relief to restaurants across Minnesota during an unprecedented period of uncertainty and economic distress.

On an even smaller scale, [Hell's Kitchen](#), the employee-owned restaurant in downtown Minneapolis, will host "Hotcakes for a Helluva Cause" on Feb. 16. The [ticketed pancake feed](#) will donate 84% of all proceeds to Mercado Central, the business hub on E. Lake Street that has seen a significant decrease in business.

What it's like to dine inside Eat Street restaurants right now

You'll find the food and hospitality one would expect from the Nicollet Avenue restaurants we know and love, with one caveat: Everyone is hurting.

[By Raphael Brion](#)

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It feels like any other frigid January morning on Eat Street. Bitter cold. Gray light. Ice that's melted and refrozen innumerable times into perilous, slippery patches. Except this January is different. There are a few spent smoke grenade canisters and flash-bangs on the street that days after [Alex Pretti's](#) killing still haven't been picked up. People move quickly with their heads down.

Inside Spyhouse Coffee, the morning begins quietly. A regular customer stops by to check in with the barista. "I just wanted to see how you are," the regular says. The answer doesn't quite form. "Well, yeah, it's ... yeah." The barista returns to work, pausing for a moment longer than usual, staring out into the cold. They have long forgotten your order; you apologize and remind them. They apologize. When the drink finally makes it your way, it's excellent, as always.

This is what dining on this stretch of Nicollet Avenue feels like now: people going through the motions, on autopilot, doing what they know how to do. The hospitality is intact; the food's the same. But the dining rooms are more empty than usual. Everyone seems dazed. People are hurting. Everything is not OK.

January was already going to be hard

January is always a slow month. Restaurateurs brace for it, they survive it. But this January arrived carrying more than cold.

Across Minnesota, restaurants everywhere have been navigating the ripple effects of heightened federal immigration enforcement for several weeks. Workers are terrified to come in. Diners are nervous to go out. Reservations vanish in waves.

Staff shortages are [severely affecting operations](#), resulting in limited menus, slower service, guarded doors, shortened hours, takeout-only pivots, temporary closures with no notice. There were moments of inspiration: [Restaurants began stepping up for their community](#) by running food drives, hosting fundraisers and donating profits.

And then came that Saturday morning.

‘How are you?’

Spending the day talking with restaurant owners, staff and customers along the city’s restaurant-rich corridor, it only takes asking, “How are you?” for the truth to spill out. Not once does anyone answer “fine.” People unload, sometimes quietly, sometimes all at once. Dining rooms meant for comfort and pleasure have become where people are at their most vulnerable.

At Marissa’s Bakery, the fryer is down — no churros today — but the conchas and puerquitos are fresh. Checking out, we ask the question. It’s hard, they say. We try. But ... we’re here. The champurrado is molten, hotter than the sun, and it burns the roof of our mouths.

At Marhaba Grill, chef and owner Mohamed Shehata has just set out the lunch buffet. He stands behind the register with a distant stare. Business is slow. He’s been here for 15 years and he’s never seen anything like this. When he realizes we’d never been in, he urges us to stay longer, pressing more food and generosity into our hands. The warmth is palpable. The vegetarian samosas were pretty good, too.

When the doors opened

At My Huong Kitchen, the energy is entirely different. Owner Tracy Wong became nationally known after videos showed her rushing protesters and reporters into her restaurant during the tear gas deployment following Pretti’s killing. “Come in! Come in my home!” she called.

Her home is a sunny, cozy restaurant filled with greenery. Much like Wong, it’s bright and exuberant. The restaurant is packed with equal parts customers and press. A couple from Shoreview came because they “saw her good heart on the news.” A protester who fled into the restaurant returns to order spring rolls, leaving a large tip. “Thank you for Saturday,” he tells her. Tracy exudes the energy and tension of someone who is having the best day of her life for the worst possible reason.

Fear travels faster than hunger

At Lu’s Sandwiches, owner Quang Pham watches the sidewalk where a memorial to Pretti grows. His hands know how to do this work — he’s made at least 10,000 bánh mì over time — but he’s on edge. Sales were down more than 25% since December, something that has never happened at this location, one of three. Many of his regulars are immigrants who don’t feel safe leaving home.

On Jan. 24, employees called to say ICE agents were outside. Pham rushed in, told staff to pack up and prepare to leave. Tear gas rolled down Nicollet. Flash-bangs echoed. The next day the street looked different: peaceful, caring, communal. “This is love,” Pham says. “This is the city that we’re fighting for.”

When regulars didn’t return, new faces showed up instead — people coming specifically to support an immigrant-owned restaurant at the epicenter of something larger. “Fifty percent is making great food,” Pham says. “The other 50 percent is the community.”

The memorial, the wound

The Pretti memorial is drawing people to Eat Street. It’s an open wound in the middle of the city. But the crowd hasn’t translated into full dining rooms. Operators talk about the disconnect: foot traffic without butts in seats, people paying respects but not staying long.

Some restaurants have locked doors; you ring a doorbell to be let in. Others run skeleton menus, like at Pimento Jamaican Kitchen, where owner Tomme Beevas is outside hugging customers with his melodic accent. Inside, the curry glows sunshine-yellow, food that feels like care.

His Pimento Relief Services has been paying people’s rent and for groceries as fast as donations come in. Elsewhere, workers organize buddy systems to get home safely. They drive each other. They check in. The gripping concern is when someone doesn’t show up for work. “Are they sick or are they just ... gone? And how do we find out,” wonders Kara Smith, a local beverage professional and Pho 79 customer.

Showing up anyway

A block away, Glam Doll Donuts [reopened to long lines](#) just days after its employees made headlines by recording Pretti’s killing across the street. There’s a steady stream of customers as the memorial grows, surrounded by television cameras and reporters. That impulse — to be physically present, to shop local, to wait in line, to tip generously — keeps repeating across Eat Street. Spending money has become a form of resistance.

At Los Sanchez, joy briefly overtakes the room: globe-sized margaritas, music loud enough to drown out the cold, warm service with the server insisting on calling the women of our table señoritas, and it feels like a compliment. At Luna & the Bear, the happy hour gin-and-jam cocktail tastes like a small mercy.

Some places are a little busy, and don’t seem to have skipped a beat, like the new school food hall Eat Street Crossing, or the Vietnamese stalwart Quang Restaurant. Regulars are turning out, but not in numbers that feel sustainable.

Not OK, but together

During our time on Eat Street, we were told many dark stories. Of people being shipped off to detention centers in Texas, with some having to pay for their flights back to Minnesota. About people afraid to go work, but not having a choice because rent is due. There was the restaurant owner who changed her route to avoid having to drive by the memorial.

At the Black Forest Inn, the German restaurant that’s been open since 1965, signs on the doors say it’s a “Warm place, come on in.” The restaurant has been offering coffee, tea, cocoa and bathrooms for people who need respite from the cold. There’s a heaviness in here, though. The bar is full of people processing their trauma out loud, including a trio watching videos of the shooting that took

place literally just outside the walls, with the volume turned all the way up, the sound of whistles shrieking. A server tells them to turn it off. The sausages are overcooked, and the bar is out of straws, but the beer keeps flowing.

At the Irish pub Prodigal Public House, laughter finally breaks through. Still, it has big “bar after a funeral” sort of energy. One of us orders a negroni, and what arrives is a perfect Aperol spritz. But we’re just grateful for the hospitality and warmth, soaking in the soundtrack of rock brogue with electric strum before calling it a night.

On our way out, the barman asked why we didn’t finish the drink. “I asked for a negroni and you made me an Aperol spritz.” “Oh! My! God!” he chortled, clutching an unlit cigarette in one hand. “I did? How do ya make a negroni again? Oh no!” He offers shots of whiskey to make up for it. Any other night, that’d be a fine resolution. But today, it’s time to go home.

Restaurants and bars are supposed to be places of joy, solace and escape. This past week on Eat Street, that spirit hasn’t disappeared, but it’s been refracted through a prism of grief and unease. Everything feels upside down.

The neighborhood is still shaken, but this instinct — to feed people, to unlock the door and welcome them in out of the cold — hasn’t gone away. Recovery and healing will take time, but for now, on Eat Street, there is still warmth and light and hospitality.

Sharyn Jackson and Joy Summers of the Minnesota Star Tribune contributed to this story.