

Labor group targets another upscale eatery

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Remi restaurant, a fixture on East 53rd Street for the past sixteen years, is the target of a labor campaign and lawsuit alleging that it violates wage and hour labor laws.

A coalition of worker advocacy groups, Justice Will Be Served, organized a rally Tuesday outside the pricey Italian restaurant. Among the protesters were five former Latino workers who say they were fired from the restaurant last year after they started organizing colleagues there.

The workers allege that they regularly worked 70-hour-plus weeks without overtime pay. A complaint was filed in federal district court last Friday by the Urban Justice Center.

While the workers aired their grievances using megaphones, the restaurant was doing a brisk lunch business inside. General manager Carlo Maggi said he could not comment on the rally because he did not know the origin of the complaints.

"We pay overtime wages," he said simply.

Arturo Caravantes says he worked for Remi for 16 years until he was fired last August shortly after he tried to organize his colleagues. His principal job was preparing coffee, he says, but he aspired to be a server at the restaurant. His manager told him he could never be a server there because he is overweight, he says. Out of work since last year, Mr. Caravantes is studying to be an auto mechanic.

Justice Will be Served is a coalition comprised of the Chinese Staff & Workers Association, National Mobilization Against Sweatshops and 318 Restaurant Workers Union. The group champions service workers who are employed by nail salons, restaurants and manufacturers. A high-profile case it started against Saigon Grill garnered a \$4.6 million settlement for 36 workers who were not paid the minimum wage or overtime.

In the Remi case, organizers are making the case that the restaurant's owners have deep pockets because they are principles in Bice Group, which owns more than 40 restaurants internationally including Bice on East 54th Street in Manhattan.

Remi's owners, Stefano Fritella and Roberto Delledonne, are respectively the chief operating and chief financial officers of Bice USA. Mr. Maggi, the general manager, also worked for Bice restaurant in Chicago.