

Florida IHOP waitress fired for buying homeless man a meal

Noah Ryan

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Victoria Hughes, a server for 13 years at a Lakeland, Florida, IHOP restaurant, was fired from her job right before the Thanksgiving holiday for feeding a homeless man.

Hughes paid for the meal with her own money after the hungry man entered the restaurant. “[W]ithout a second thought, I bought a stack of pancakes and made him a water,” she told WFLA, a local news station.

The homeless man returned later in the day with a family who bought him a meal. The restaurant manager then loudly demanded the family not feed the man, and next approached Hughes. Yelling, the manager reprimanded Hughes for feeding a homeless person. He accused her of potentially causing a “loitering issue” and a “safety issue for customers,” telling Hughes to immediately go home.

Hughes received a phone call at her home on the following Tuesday—two days before Thanksgiving—in which the manager told her she was fired for violating “company policy.”

In a social media post, Hughes explained that after “13 years of employment” in which she was “dedicated and showed loyalty to this company” she had been fired “a week before the holidays over a charitable act.”

“I need my job, but I would still do it again,” Hughes later told WFLA. “I truly would. I would still help somebody if I could. If he asked me for my shirt, I probably would have tried to give him that too.”

Hughes’ social media post quickly garnered over 1,000 shares and hundreds of positive and supportive comments. She also set up a GoFundMe page to help cover costs while she looks for another job. As of this writing it has received 70 donations totaling over \$1,600.

The IHOP manager who fired Hughes also took to social media, concocting new reasons to justify the

cruel act—and in the process revealing the ruthless workplace dictatorship under which so many Americans labor:

You cannot give food or money to the homeless on this property. It almost always goes sideways due to the mental health issues they suffer from. You are responsible for any issue resulting from this action including suspension or termination. Also: when you do your paperwork you sign a legal document stating you cannot post about work online... also a termination offense. Subversion, misconduct. And Insubordination is also a termination offense. All of these together mean I couldn’t save you if i wanted to....Get real. If you have a problem, I generally work with everyone. But if you force a resolution, it will never work out in your favor.

The reaction to the firing of Hughes and management’s vilification of homeless people generated enough backlash that the corporation ultimately called Hughes and offered her job back, as well as compensation for the days she missed work.

Dan Enea, the CEO of Sunshine Restaurant Partners, which runs over 150 IHOP locations, then released a statement dripping with the “PR” cynicism of corporate America:

We are committed to providing an inclusive environment, welcome to everyone. As we actively investigate this situation, we will utilize

this as an opportunity to train our employees on how to approach instances surrounding food insecurity... To continue our commitment to supporting those in need in our local community, we are making a donation to Feeding America as well as local Lakeland charities that support food insecurity.

Such saccharine rhetoric will not impact the criminalization of the homeless in the US nor hit at the root economic causes of the country's growing homelessness crisis. Indeed, it is official policy in the state of Florida: Governor Ron DeSantis in March signed a law that bans homeless people from sleeping in public. The law went into effect in October.

According to Florida's Council on Homelessness, as of January 2023, 30,809 people were suffering homelessness, defined as individuals living in a shelter or a place deemed uninhabitable. This number is a staggering 19.1 percent increase from the previous year. From 2019-2023, the rate of "literal homelessness" increased 9 percent, though this number is certainly an undercount.

Homelessness is one of the many symptoms of ever-widening social inequality in America, a society in which a thin layer of super-rich hoards all of society's wealth. According to data from the Florida Policy Institute, Florida ranked second with the worst inequality in the nation. Of the 25 metro areas in the country with the highest levels of inequality, eight were in Florida.

Under President Biden, the wealth of America's billionaires grew by 62 percent. Meanwhile, the bottom 50 percent hold just 3 percent of household wealth in the country. Inflation has made it harder for workers to buy basic necessities such as food and housing.

The incoming Trump administration, filled with fascists, quacks and billionaires, has pledged to gut all social spending. These policies will guarantee a rapid increase in homelessness, hunger and other social ills.



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