

Servers sue U.S. restaurant firm over wages

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Darden Restaurants violated federal labour laws by underpaying thousands of servers across the United States at Olive Garden, Longhorn Steakhouse, Red Lobster and other eateries, according to a lawsuit filed Thursday on behalf of the workers.

The lawsuit filed in Miami federal court seeks to collectively represent current and past employees who worked for Darden from August 2009 to the present. It seeks potentially tens of millions of dollars in back pay and other compensation, plus interest and attorney fees, said lead lawyer David Lichter.

"Darden has a company-wide pattern and practice of paying its employees below minimum wage and less than what the law requires," Lichter said.

The Orlando-based company's website said it has more than 2,000 restaurants in North America that employ about 180,000 people. Darden does not franchise its restaurants.

The U.S. Department of Labor has found violations similar to those claimed

in the lawsuit in several individual investigations, including a 2011 probe in which the company agreed to pay more than \$25,000 in back wages to Olive Garden workers in Mesquite, Texas. Darden was also assessed a \$30,800 fine in that case.

There are similar lawsuits pending in Illinois and New York, but the one filed in Florida is the first seeking to represent all Darden workers at its four major brands: Olive Garden, Red Lobster, Longhorn Steakhouse and The Capital Grille. Its named plaintiffs are two Darden workers in Florida and Virginia.

The lawsuit was filed under the Fair Labor Standards Act. Its claims against Darden include:

- Servers showed up for shifts as scheduled but were not allowed to clock in until customers began arriving.
- Employees who worked beyond 40 hours a week were not paid 1.5 times their regular pay as required under U.S. law.

Attorneys said it was unclear how much money is owed to the entire class of affected Darden workers, which they expect to easily top 1,000 people.