

Employment

Most Food System Workers Have Low Wages, Few Benefits, Report Says

Only 13.5 percent of the 20 million workers employed in jobs in the nation's food system earn liveable wages, while the vast majority receive low wages with little or no access to paid sick days and health benefits, according to a report released June 6.

Without a sustainable wage or basic benefits such as paid sick leave for employees working in the food chain, the nation's food supply is being put at risk on a daily basis, according to the report, *The Hands that Feed Us: Challenges and Opportunities for Workers Along the Food Chain*.

"Given the size of the industry and its impact on our nation's economy, food security, and public health, it is imperative that wages and working conditions improve for the 20 million workers in all segments of the chain," the report concluded.

The report, which was released by the Food Chain Workers Alliance, is based on 629 surveys of workers and 47 interviews with employers in food production, processing, distribution, retail, and service. Together these industries employ 20 million people in the United States, comprising one-sixth of the nation's workforce, the alliance said.

According to its website, the Food Chain Workers Alliance is "a coalition of worker-based organizations whose members plant, harvest, process, pack, transport, prepare, serve, and sell food, organizing to improve wages and working conditions for all workers along the food chain."

The report found that more than 86 percent of surveyed workers reported that they receive subminimum wages (23 percent), poverty wages (37.6 percent), or low wages (25 percent). This has resulted in a "sad irony: food workers face higher levels of food insecurity, or the inability to afford to eat, than the rest of the U.S. workforce," the report said.

In releasing the 92-page report, Joann Lo, the alliance's executive director, said "most people don't think about the millions of food system workers who make it possible for us to shop in grocery stores or eat in restaurants. This report is intended to make these people visible, and serve as a wake-up call for policy makers, employers, and consumers to make the entire system more just."

Key Findings of Report. Among the report's major findings:

- Food system workers lack benefits, with 79 percent either not having a single paid sick day or not knowing if they have paid sick days. More than half of the workers surveyed (53 percent) reported picking, processing, selling, cooking, and serving food while sick, an average of at least three days per year.

- More than half (58 percent) have no health coverage, and more than one third of all workers surveyed (34.8 percent) report using the emergency room for primary health care. In addition, 80 percent of these workers are unable to pay for such care.

- Food workers rely on public support, using food stamps at twice the rate of the rest of the workforce and are more likely to receive Medicaid than workers in other industries.

- Food workers do not receive proper safety training, with more than half of the surveyed workers (52 percent) reporting they did not receive any on-the-job health and safety training, and nearly a third (32.7 percent) reporting their employers did not always provide necessary equipment to do their jobs. More than half (57.2 percent) reported they suffered an injury or a health problem on the job.

- Many workers experience employment law violations, with 36 percent reporting wage theft that averaged \$35.48 in the previous week.

- Many workers reported working long hours and some reported they work more than one job. Some 40 percent said they work more than 40 hours a week. Another 11 percent work more than 60 hours a week at two or more jobs to make ends meet.

In order to address the issues the alliance said are threatening food safety and public health, the report made a number of recommendations to improve the country's food system.

Recommendations for Policymakers. The alliance made a number of recommendations for policymakers, calling for them to:

- increase and index the federal minimum wage, while raising and indexing the federal subminimum wage for tipped workers to at least 70 percent of the regular minimum wage, thus reducing poverty and reliance on public assistance;

- guarantee paid sick leave by establishing a national standard that allows workers to earn seven to nine job-protected paid days off each year. “Requiring paid sick days of all employers would level the playing field for responsible employers who currently provide these important benefits”;

- guarantee access to health care to allow these workers to care for themselves and their families and not incur “unsustainable medical debt,” while at the same time improving food safety and the public’s health. Until a national health system is in place, policy-makers should fund and expand health care cooperatives for food system workers;

- increase penalties for employers who engage in wage theft, including improper overtime payments, shaving workers’ hours, and failing to pay workers their wages and tips. “Besides being illegal, rampant wage theft in the food system reduces food workers’ actual take-home pay and also results in a reduction in income taxes that are owed to the government”;

- address health and safety risks through the creation by the Department of Labor’s Occupational Safety and Health Administration of a special health and safety task force that could work to highlight egregious violations and educate employers about the benefits of reducing hazards on the job;

- guarantee these workers the right to organize into unions in order to improve their wages and working conditions; and

- ensure labor standards and worker protections are included in institutional procurement policies and governmental subsidies and loan programs.

The report also made a number of recommendations for employers, calling on them: to adopt benefits such as paid sick days to decrease the risk of spreading diseases between employees and decreasing turnover costs; to enhance job quality by increasing wages and benefits as a way to increase productivity and retention; and to respect the “internationally recognized workers’ right to freedom of association and collective bargaining.”

The surveys and interviews for the report were conducted by 11 member organizations of the alliance—Brandworkers International; CATA-the Farmworkers Support Committee; Center for New Community; Coalition of Immokalee Workers; Northwest Arkansas Workers’ Justice Center; Restaurant Opportunities Centers United; Restaurant Opportunities Center of New York; United Food and Commercial Workers Local 1500; UFCW Local 770; Warehouse Workers for Justice; and UNITE HERE.

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