

FOOD CHAIN WORKERS ALLIANCE



Human Rights from Field to Fork

“Every time we sit at a table at night or in the morning to enjoy the fruits and grain and vegetables from our good earth, remember that they come from the work of men and women and children who have been exploited for generation... too often we don’t pay attention, we don’t stop to think that, even in this day and age, injustice remains an invisible ingredient in much of the food that we eat.”

- Cesar Chavez, United Farm Workers Co-Founder

A FOOD SYSTEM THAT IS UNJUST FOR WORKERS



Photo by Scott Robertson

Food is a human right, and the human rights of those who produce our food, from field to table, must be respected as well. The food system is a significant part of the United States economy – according to a study for the organic industry, non-restaurant food sales in 2009 were an estimated \$670 billion. That same year, restaurant sales were \$566 billion. Together they constituted almost 9% of the Gross Domestic Product. Food workers organizing together possess the power to change the food system.

exploited labor, most of whom are people of color and immigrants.

In the United States, over 20 million people work in the food system, joining millions more around the world whose labor and livelihoods are in the food sector. Consolidated corporate power, international trade policies, and institutionalized racism in the U.S. and around the world have created a food system built on

In the early colonial days, African slaves and indentured labor from Europe provided their free labor to produce food. After the Civil War, African American sharecroppers in the South and Asian immigrants in the West became the low-paid workforce in the food system. Now people of color and immigrants from around the world take on these dangerous and lowest-paying jobs in the U.S., and many food system workers are actually excluded from some of the most basic labor protections, such as the rights to overtime pay and to form a union.



Photo courtesy of the Restaurant Opportunities Centers United

“Instead of paying workers well enough to allow them to buy things like cars... companies like Wal-Mart and McDonald’s pay their workers so poorly that they can afford only the cheap, low-quality food these companies sell, creating a kind of nonvirtuous circle driving down both wages and the quality of food.”

- Michael Pollan, author and journalist

WAGES AND WORKING CONDITIONS IN THE U.S. FOOD SYSTEM



Photo courtesy of the United Food and Commercial Workers union

Many food workers are paid poverty wages, do not receive health insurance or paid sick days, and suffer a high rate of illnesses and injuries. Due to trade policies, war, and other factors, millions of workers must migrate to the U.S. to work, leaving their children in their home country.

- **Farmworkers** - Three out of five farmworker families in the U.S. have incomes below the poverty level, and about 400,000 farmworkers are children.
- **Food processing workers** - More than 1 in 10 workers in meatpacking plants suffer illness and injuries, double the rate for all U.S. manufacturing.
- **Restaurant Workers** - A national survey of workers showed that

discrimination is a major problem in the restaurant industry – at \$11.50 per hour, workers of color earn more than \$3/hour less than white restaurant workers.

- **Grocery workers** - A recent report found that in three major U.S. cities, 23% of grocery workers were paid less than the minimum wage, and 65% were not paid overtime.
- **Warehouse workers** - Two reports found that a majority of warehouse workers are employed by temp agencies that pay them minimum wage... or less.

Without living wages and benefits, food system workers often don't have access to and cannot afford healthy food. They often must work more than one job or over 12-hour days in order to pay for rent, food, and other necessities.

TOWARD TRUE SUSTAINABILITY:

UPHOLDING THE INHERENT WORTH AND DIGNITY OF FOOD WORKERS

In the United States, a movement towards sustainable food has been growing, as evidenced by interest in community gardens, urban agriculture, and healthy, local and "slow" food. However, the issues of labor rights in the food system have not received equal attention, and despite many positive efforts, most of these "sustainable food" initiatives do not integrate the voices and leadership of the workers who plant, harvest, process, pack, transport, prepare, serve, and sell food.

Food workers and their organizations recently joined forces to form the Food Chain Workers Alliance (FCWA). Its mission is to improve the wages and working conditions of food system workers and their families. FCWA program areas include strategic campaigns, worker solidarity, evaluation of certification programs and labor standards, policy and education.

The Alliance members are working together to end poverty and hunger, as well as to achieve sustainable agricultural and food production, social, racial and environmental justice, and respect for workers' rights.

FCWA members: Brandworkers International
CATA - Farmworker Support Committee • Center for New Community
Coalition of Immokalee Workers • International Labor Rights Forum
Just Harvest USA • NW Arkansas Workers' Justice Center
Restaurant Opportunities Center of NY
Restaurant Opportunities Centers United
United Food & Commercial Workers Local 1500
Warehouse Workers for Justice



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