

FOOD CHAIN WORKERS ALLIANCE



Human Rights from Farm to Plate

“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 – the industries of food production, processing, distribution, retail and service sell over \$1.5 trillion dollars in goods and services annually, accounting for over 10 percent of U.S. economic activity. Food workers organizing together possess the power to change the food system.

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

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

In the U.S. people of color make \$2.50 per hour less than white workers in the food chain, and more people of color live in poverty than white food workers. And women of all races make substantially less than white men in the food system.

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, suffer a high rate of illnesses and injuries, and are discriminated against because of race and/or gender. 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** - One-quarter of all farmworkers had family incomes below the federal poverty line, and 300,000-800,000 farmworkers are children. Human trafficking and slavery are still problems in the agricultural industry as well - Florida alone has seen 9 prosecutions for forced labor involving farmworkers since 1997.
- **Food processing workers** - More than 1 in 10 workers in meatpacking plants suffer illness and injuries, double the rate for all U.S. manufacturing.
- **Food manufacturing workers** - The rates of work-related injury or illness are higher than the rates for all of manufacturing and for the private sector as a whole.
- **Food Service Workers** - A national survey of workers showed that white restaurant workers earn on average \$13.25/hour while workers of color earn on average just \$9.54. Overall, on average non-union food service workers earn just \$7.80/hour, while union workers make an average of \$10.32/hour.
- **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. Young workers age 16 to 24 hold nearly one-third of grocery store jobs.
- **Warehouse workers** - A majority of warehouse workers are employed by temp agencies that pay them minimum wage... or less. In the Chicago area, nearly 40% of warehouse workers interviewed reported being discriminated against, most commonly because of race.

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 and other basics.

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.

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 & Local 770

Warehouse Workers for Justice • UNITE HERE Food Service Division



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