

# 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

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. Then came Mexican *braceros* and other Latino workers. 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.

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 agriculture, food production, processing, distribution, retail and service sell over \$1.8 trillion dollars in goods and services annually, accounting for an estimated 13 percent of U.S. GDP. And, one-sixth of the U.S. workforce - close to 20 million people - work in the food system, joining millions more around the world whose labor and livelihoods are in the food sector. Food workers organizing together possess the power to change the food system.



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 by Earl Dotter

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. The Food Chain Workers Alliance surveyed over 600 workers and analyzed government data on workers in agriculture, food and meat-processing plants, warehouses, grocery, and food service and restaurants. Some of the key findings include:

- **WAGES:** There are some good jobs in the food system (13.5% of workers surveyed earn livable wages), but the vast majority are incredibly low-wage, with 23% of the surveyed workers earning below the minimum wage.
- **RELIANCE ON PUBLIC SUPPORT:** Food workers face higher levels of food insecurity, or the inability to afford to eat, than the rest of the U.S. workforce. They therefore use food stamps at double the rate of the general U.S. workforce.
- **LACK OF BENEFITS:** Seventy-nine percent of the food workers surveyed do not have a single paid sick day, or do not know if they have paid sick days, and 58% lack health coverage. Consequently, 53% admitted to working while sick.
- **HEALTH & SAFETY:** Fifty-two percent of the surveyed workers did not receive any health and safety training from their employer. Over 57% reported suffering an injury or an illness on the job.

### 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 have joined forces to form the Food Chain Workers Alliance. Our mission is to improve the wages and working conditions of food system workers and their families. Alliance program areas include a strategic coordinated organizing campaign, worker leadership development, policy, and education. The Alliance members are working together to end poverty and hunger, as well as to achieve social, racial and environmental justice, respect for workers’ rights, and sustainable agricultural and food production.

You can read more about food workers, as well as profiles of “high-road” employers in the food system, in our report *“THE HANDS THAT FEED US: Challenges and Opportunities for Workers Along the Food Chain,”* downloadable from our website.

*“If you care about sustainability — the capacity to endure — it’s time to expand our definition to include workers. You can’t call food sustainable when it’s produced by people whose capacity to endure is challenged by poverty-level wages.”*

-Mark Bittman, author and New York Times Columnist

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 (ROC) of NY • ROC United

United Food & Commercial Workers Local 1500 & Local 770

Warehouse Workers for Justice • Warehouse Workers United

UNITE HERE Food Service Division



**FOOD CHAIN  
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