



## BI-NATIONAL PEOPLE'S TRIBUNAL ON THE STRUGGLES OF FARMWORKERS IN NORTH AMERICA

Concept Paper - January 2024

Around the globe, hundreds of millions of food workers make it possible for the world to eat. Almost all the food we eat passes through the hands of workers who plant, harvest, process, package, transport, prepare, sell, and serve. In the U.S. alone there are more than 22 million food workers, making the food industry the largest employer. The food industry is also the most exploitative.

Food workers receive the lowest median wage of any industry, leaving them and their communities unable to afford the very food they produce and more dependent on public assistance than any other workforce. They are subjected to extremely dangerous working conditions, with high rates of injury, death, and illness across the food chain. Food workers are also greatly impacted by climate change from rising temperatures in the fields and workplaces, to climate disasters such as wildfires. These conditions along with increasing precariousness and the lack of job security leave food workers vulnerable to wage theft, racial, ethnic, gender discrimination and violence.

Labor is essential to our food system. Yet, food workers are treated as disposable at every stage while their labor and exploitation remains invisible. [This was made even more clear during the COVID pandemic.](#) The pandemic highlighted the critical role that “essential” food workers play in sustaining our communities, and exposed the degree of disposability that workers faced when they were unprotected and in many ways abandoned.



The pandemic exacerbated pre-existing conditions of a global profit-driven food system. Racist immigration and criminal justice systems and weak labor regimes maintain a capitalist system that creates a flow of an exploitable workforce. This race to the bottom in the food economy does not only impact workers. The cycle of producing cheap food has also led to extreme degradation of our health and environment.

This food and labor system is rooted in a history of slavery and colonization, which continues to shape conditions today. We understand that in order to dismantle institutions of labor exploitation we must also dismantle institutions of racism and colonization. Likewise, global capitalism and imperialism in the form of economic violence, war, and militarization of our cities and borders also strongly shape these conditions. We believe our struggles must always reflect this analysis and build global solidarity.

### The Supply Chain

There is a good chance that the cucumber or tomato you recently had in your salad was planted and harvested in Canada, by a guest worker who left Jamaica because the legacy of colonialism in the Caribbean made life unlivable, who then developed a serious injury or illness while harvesting that vegetable, and then was abandoned by the state and their employer, with no healthcare, no protection, and no status. That same cucumber or tomato was driven out of Canada by a truck driver with no job security, and was taken to a warehouse in Illinois, where a warehouse worker will pack it in unsafe conditions, for paltry wages on a temporary assignment through an agency, because a

former criminal conviction on his record is exploited to keep him working as a temp until he can't work anymore. The same cucumber or tomato will then be taken to a non-union supermarket that managed to stay open after the most recent consolidation of the food retail market resulted in the closing of several unionized stores. Or maybe it will be sent to a restaurant where kitchen workers are experiencing verbal abuse by their bosses while also experiencing high rates of wage theft and wait staff are still making a sub-minimum wage. What also binds this supply chain together, is a global system of capitalism and imperialism that maintains racist systems of oppression.

### **FCWA Farmworker Committee**

Farm labor, including in dairy, is a key part of the supply chain. Grassroots farmworker organizations have been part of FCWA's leadership since its founding. In 2019 our farmworker members throughout the US and Canada began to organically build a new, collective platform for the grassroots farmworker movement under the larger food worker platform and principles of the FCWA which centers *worker leadership, global justice, racial justice, migrant justice, gender justice, climate justice, bread and roses, cross-sector solidarity, food sovereignty and building alternative economic systems.*

FCWA farmworker members are fighting for the right to organize and for basic protections through workplace and community fights as well as policy campaigns. Some of the critical issues that our members have taken on are heat stress, the right to overtime, livable wages and livable housing, as well as campaigns for worker-driven social responsibility in the northeast dairy industry. We have also seen ground-breaking community and legal fights for racial justice against Canada's racist guestworker program. Overall, FCWA members are organizing for a system that values their labor and where their communities can thrive, not just through better workplace conditions, but through their own sovereignty.

In 2019, FCWA farmworker members stood together to oppose the Farm Workforce Modernization Act, a federal bill that was branded as offering a path to legalization for farmworkers, yet what it proposed in reality was a long and complicated path to residency status, tied to exploitation. In 2023, the bill was introduced for the third time, and our members will continue to oppose it.

This work is why grassroots farmworkers are coming together to build a collective analysis, narrative, and vision for the farmworker movement going forward. There is no national or bi-national alliance of farmworkers putting forward this vision currently, and our farmworker members see a critical need to fill this void to counter harmful narratives by industry groups and corporate-backed politicians, and continued efforts to block efforts to unionize and organize.

Our current legal and political system will not bring justice for exploited workers. FCWA members in the farmworker sector are leaders of a grassroots movement, and they have decided to not only work defensively against the forces that oppress them, but also to create their own solutions.

### **The Tribunal**

FCWA members are coming together to develop a bi-national farmworker tribunal in New York City from March 29th to March 31st of 2024. In this participatory process, farmworkers will testify about the conditions they face and their vision of the rights and protections they deserve. In doing so, FCWA farmworker leaders will co-create an alternate vision and narrative of farmworker justice.

The tribunal will take place over 3 days and bring together worker leaders and organizers from 12 FCWA grassroots member groups: [Migrant Justice](#) (Vermont), [CATA](#) (New Jersey, Maryland, Pennsylvania), [Workers' Center of Central New York, Rural & Migrant Ministry](#) (New York), [Alianza Agrícola](#) (New York), [Farmworker Association of Florida](#), [Pioneer Valley Workers Center](#) (Massachusetts), [Familias Unidas por la Justicia](#) (Washington), [Community to Community Development](#) (Washington), [Justicia for Migrant Workers](#) (Ontario, Canada); as well as ally members (non-worker led advocates) [California Institute for Rural Studies](#) and [Worker Justice Center of New York](#).

### **People's Tribunals**

*People's tribunals are forums of justice set up by social justice movements, communities and organizations that bring attention to the truths that our judicial and political forums either cannot engage with or choose not to.*

*There is a long history of people's tribunals used by movements across the world to expose systems of oppression while building accountability.*

*Although People's Tribunals have no legal authority beyond the integrity and respect generated from the process and participants, they are set up to shed light and amplify human rights violations and a vision for addressing those violations.*

**BI-NATIONAL  
PEOPLE'S TRIBUNAL  
ON THE STRUGGLES OF  
FARMWORKERS IN NORTH AMERICA**

**MARCH 29 – 31, 2024  
NEW YORK CITY**

Join worker leaders and organizers in a historic tribunal organized by the FCWA Farmworker Committee