



**FOOD CHAIN
WORKERS ALLIANCE**

HUMAN RIGHTS FROM FIELD TO FORK



Grace over a Thanksgiving meal, from Interfaith Worker Justice:

In a moment we will eat this food, harvest from many parts of the nation and the world. It will be transformed into the flesh and blood of our bodies. Keep us mindful of the many workers who labor in the field and factory to bring us this food. From the bounty and nourishment of the meal, we dedicate ourselves to work to abolish poverty, unsafe working conditions, workplace abuse, and unjust wages among those who feed us through their labor.

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.

According to the “Responsible Consumption is our Moral Imperative” Statement of Conscience (2001), the Unitarian Universalist faith embraces an ethic of responsible consumption with a passion for seeking truth, a thirst for making justice, a vision of interdependence, and a willingness to reexamine our individual actions and beliefs.



Photo by Chris Kirchhoff, mediaclubsouthafrica.com

A FOOD SYSTEM THAT IS UNJUST FOR WORKERS

“Let us not concede that economic injustice, poverty, and racism are tolerable.”

–“Economic Injustice, Poverty, and Racism: We Can Make a Difference!”
Statement of Conscience (2000)

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 United States and around the world have created a food system built on exploited workers, most of whom are people of color and immigrants.

In the early colonial days, African slaves and indentured servants from Europe were forced to provide 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 United States, and many food system workers are actually excluded from some of the most basic labor protections, such as the rights to form a union and to receive overtime pay.



Photo by Darren Linker, [Young Worker Health & Safety Program](http://YoungWorkerHealth&SafetyProgram.org)

WAGES AND WORKING CONDITIONS IN THE FOOD SYSTEM

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 United States to work, leaving their children in their home countries. 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.

WAGES AND WORKING CONDITIONS IN THE FOOD SYSTEM

FARMWORKERS

Three out of five farmworker families 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 at \$11.50/hour, workers of color on average earn \$3.20/hour less than white restaurant workers.

GROCERY WORKERS

A recent report found that 23 percent of grocery workers were paid less than the minimum wage, and 65 percent were not paid overtime. Young workers ages 16 to 24 hold nearly one-third of grocery store jobs.

WAREHOUSE WORKERS

In the greater Chicago area and in Southern California, the two major warehouse centers in the United States, a majority of workers are employed by temp agencies that pay them minimum wage and sometimes less.



“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, journalist and author

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. Learn more about the Alliance at www.foodchainworkers.org.

The Unitarian Universalist Service Committee (UUSC), a human rights and social justice organization, has joined in collaboration with the Food Chain Workers Alliance to advance the rights of the workers in the food system to work in dignity for a living wage and to organize in defense of their labor rights. UUSC’s Economic Justice Program supports and strengthens the movement for workers’ rights in the United States and overseas by partnering with grassroots groups that are developing innovative strategies to improve wages and working conditions for workers, farmers, traders, and their families. Learn more at www.uusc.org/economicjustice.



Please see our “Take Action” sheet to find out how you can support the organizing efforts of workers in our food system!

