

Food First BACKGROUND

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Photo by David Bacon

Food Workers - Food Justice: *Linking food, labor and immigrant rights*

By Eric Holt-Giménez, Zoe Brent & Annie Shattuck

The food movement in the US is growing stronger, but too often the people who work in our food system are overlooked. Some 17% of all U.S. jobs are in the food sector.ⁱ Many of these jobs are carried out by undocumented immigrant workers. Consequently, food workers are the lowest paid and most under-protected workers in the nation. Low wages and substandard working conditions subsidize the enormous profits of the food industry and puts the triple burden of poverty, labor abuse and food insecurity on those most vulnerable. The movement for food justice cannot thrive in a system where food workers are criminalized, exploited, and going hungry.

Labor in the Corporate Food System

In 2009, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics listed food preparation and serving-related occupations as the lowest paid of all occupational categories (\$8.59 median wage), followed by farming, fishing and forestry (\$9.34 median wage). Twenty-five percent of grocery workers experience minimum wage violations.ⁱⁱ On-the-job injuries are common. According to Oxfam, in 2004 farm-workers suffered the highest rates of toxic chemical injuries, with an estimated 300,000 pesticide poisonings yearly.ⁱⁱⁱ

A decline in union representation—from 35% to 12% since World War II—parallels the spread of poor labor conditions, dependence on undocumented labor and corporate concentration.^{iv} Aggressive anti-union campaigns and recruitment of temporary or foreign workers hinder organizing efforts and keep labor costs painfully low. Real wages for meatpacking workers fell from \$20/hr in 1977 to \$10.50/hr in 2001, while consolidation of the beef packing industry increased drastically.^v By 1999 the top four firms controlled 80% of the market—more than doubling in two decades.^{vi} Meanwhile,

rates of undocumented workers have risen to an estimated 20 to 50% of the workforce.^{vii} Sadly, this kind of exploitation is not unique to meatpacking, but also common in the field, the store, and the restaurant.

In The Field: The women and men who harvest, pack, process and serve our food can't afford to feed their own families healthy food. Research conducted by the California Institute for Rural Studies (CIRS) (2007) in Fresno County, CA—the state's breadbasket—found that 45% of farm workers surveyed were food insecure and 48% were on food stamps—more than double the national average.^{viii} Since job opportunities and wage rates are key determinants of food security, it is safe to assume that food workers are among the most insecure. Their dependence on cheap, processed food as a source of needed calories results in high rates of obesity and diet-related illnesses. Another survey done by the CIRS in 1999 of farm workers in six regions throughout California found that 81% of males and 76% of females were overweight and 28% and 37% were obese, respectively.^{ix}

In The Store: In food retail, permanent, economically secure jobs are being replaced with temporary contract work. Labor contractors provide large firms with short-term workers for low-wage, low-skill jobs. Why? All personnel, insurance and labor issues relating to those employees automatically become the responsibility of the contract agent. In this way, big corporations can wash their hands of responsibility for inhumane or unfair job conditions—even as they profit from exploited labor. As Safeway spokeswoman, Susan Houghton stated when asked about the unfair and unhealthy labor conditions of Safeway's janitors, "We just contract with these companies to provide services... This is something you need to talk to the vendors about."^x Workers bouncing from job to job are less likely to organize and unionize than workers with job security and legal residency. This undermines labor rights and

long-term economic security for all workers, encouraging a "race to the bottom" in the labor market.

In The Restaurant: Jobs in the restaurant business have grown significantly faster than jobs in other sectors in the past decade, but the benefits of growth do not necessarily filter down to workers. At \$2.13 an hour, the federal minimum wage for tipped workers has not changed in 19 years, in fact it fell 37% in real terms since it was established in 1991. According to the [National Employment Law Project](#), tipped workers have twice the poverty rate of other workers.^{xi}

Wages are only the tip of the iceberg. The [Restaurant Opportunities Center](#) study of working conditions in five major cities found that some 90% of restaurant workers did not have health insurance or paid sick days, nearly 70% said they worked even when they were ill, and some 40% were not paid for overtime. Moreover, the few good jobs in the restaurant industry tend to go to white workers over people of color. The median income of white restaurant workers is 22% higher than for workers of color. The Center also found that white job seekers are 25% more likely to get interviews than workers of color with similar qualifications.^{xii}

Immigration: the key issue—the false debate

Recent anti-immigrant legislation in the state of Arizona allows law officers to detain and arrest any person suspected of being undocumented. By criminalizing immigrants, this discriminatory law allows politicians to avoid addressing the causes of migration and the widespread abuses of immigrant labor, thus undermining the position of all workers—especially in the food system.

Current immigration law rewards labor abuses. Fines for violating the National Labor Relations Act (NRLA) are minimal. The 1986

Immigration Reform and Control Act links one's legal status to one's job, criminalizing undocumented labor. As a result, firing and the threat of deportation are used to silence workers who speak out or attempt to organize. The use of undocumented labor is remarkably profitable for industry. In California—the richest agricultural state in the nation—undocumented immigrants' *gross economic contribution* through sales, income, and property taxes, was \$45,000/person (including children) in 1994. Yet the workers were paid an average of \$8,840 each. The difference is profit that goes directly to industry—primarily construction, agriculture, food processing, restaurants and services.^{xiii}

Little attention is paid to why people migrate in the first place. Free trade agreements allow the US to dump its surplus of subsidized grain abroad where it sells at prices well under the costs of production. Since 1994, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) has bankrupted much of rural Mexico, driving over two million smallholders out of the countryside.^{xiv} The very same companies that benefit from NAFTA also save on labor costs by actively recruiting those same smallholders as undocumented workers to fill underpaid jobs.^{xv} Research from the Pew Hispanic Center in 2006 indicates that some 24% of farm workers, 12% of food preparation workers, and 27% of butchers and food processors are undocumented.^{xvi}

Linking food justice with worker and immigrant rights

Addressing worker and immigrants rights in the food system is a key step toward community food security and food sovereignty—the democratic control over our food systems.

Fixing federal and state policy is essential, but the grassroots are not waiting for leadership from above. Workers, farmers and activists are already busy changing the labor landscape in the food system:



CIW Protesting Burger King in Miami - Photo by NESRI

In the Field: The *Coalition of Immokalee Workers*, in alliance with the student-led Fair Food Challenge, have successfully campaigned to end modern-day slavery in Florida's tomato fields. Their combined pressure convinced Taco Bell, McDonald's, Burger King, Whole Foods and others to buy only from growers who agreed to pay another penny a pound to pickers.

Swanton Berry Farms of Davenport, CA, the first organic farm to invite and sign a union contract with the United Farm Workers, provides a union wage, health benefits, subsidized housing, and stock options to career-oriented farmworkers.

In the Store: Twenty-two percent of all grocery store workers belong to a union or are covered by union contracts, compared with 14 percent in other industries. The benefits of union contracts are striking. Unionized women earn on average 11.2% more than their non-union counterparts. Young workers earn 12.4% more. Workers in chain stores are more likely to be unionized or covered by contracts than workers in independent grocery stores, but new independent models are emerging as well.^{xvii}

The new People's Grocery Market and Mandela Marketplace in Oakland, California base their business models on worker-ownership and a community

service mission to bring fresh healthy produce and good jobs to low-income neighborhoods.

In the Restaurant: The [Restaurant Opportunities Center](#) recommends an immediate increase in the minimum wage for tipped workers, paid sick days, and access to health insurance, as well as what they call

"high road" practices to "assist and encourage employers to provide living wages, basic workplace benefits, and opportunities for advancement to restaurant workers." Such initiatives include rent and property tax incentives for employers who implement exceptional workplace practices, subsidies to employment-based health insurance and collective health insurance provisions. The Center's worker-owned restaurant already follows "high road practices" while paying workers a genuine living wage.

The Restaurant Opportunities Center, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers and at least one United Food and Commercial Workers local are all members of a new coalition—the *Food Chain Workers Alliance*—fighting for fairness from farm to fork.

These are just a few examples of a growing movement beginning to link food and labor justice. In order to achieve a more equitable food system, the criminalization of workers, enforced inequality, and the use of immigration policy as a supply system for exploited labor, all need to change. A fair deal for food workers is an essential part of the foundation of an equitable, sustainable food system. Understanding food justice as a labor issue—and labor as a food justice issue—is an important step in this direction.

NOTES

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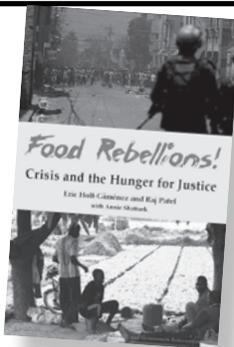
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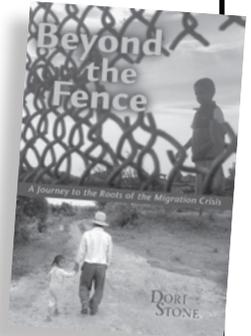
by Eric Holt-Giménez and Raj Patel, with Annie Shattuck. Today there are over a billion hungry people on the planet, more than ever before in history. Why, in a time of record harvests, are a record number of people going hungry? And why are a handful of corporations making record profits? *Food Rebellions!* tells the real story behind the global food crisis and documents the growing trend of grassroots solutions to hunger spreading around the world. Official plans to solve the world food crisis call for more free trade and technical fixes--solutions that have already failed. *Food Rebellions!* is a trail marker on the journey to end hunger and build food sovereignty. \$19.95

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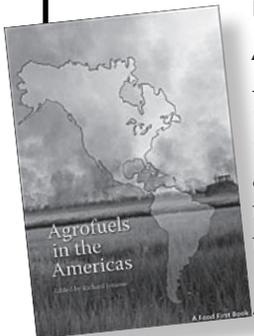
hope. They are the stories of farmers, politicians and activists on both sides of the border. "The book is ideally suited for students, but I can think of few people who would not benefit from reading it." - Angus Wright, author of *The Death of Ramon Gonzales: The Modern Agricultural Dilemma*. Beyond the Fence, \$16.95



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