The food movement in the US is growing stronger, but too often the people who work in our food system are overlooked. Low wages and sub-standard working conditions subsidize the enormous profits of the food industry while those most vulnerable suffer labor abuses and food insecurity. The movement for food justice cannot thrive in a system where food and farm workers are criminalized, exploited and hungry.

Some 17 percent of all US jobs are in the food sector but many of these jobs offer poverty wages and dangerous working conditions. A decline in union representation—from 35 to 12 percent since World War II—parallels the spread of poor labor conditions, dependence on undocumented labor and corporate monopoly control. Aggressive anti-union campaigns and recruitment of temporary or foreign workers hinder organizing efforts and keep labor costs painfully low. Meanwhile, rates of undocumented workers have risen to an estimated 20 to 50 percent of the workforce and real wages have fallen dramatically.

The women and men who harvest, pack, process and serve our food can’t afford to feed their own families healthy food. Their dependence on cheap, processed food as a source of calories results in high rates of obesity and diet related illnesses. In food retail, permanent, economically secure jobs are being replaced with temporary contract work. Jobs in the restaurant industry have grown significantly faster than jobs in other industries in the past decade, but the benefits of this 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. Most restaurant workers don’t have health insurance or paid sick days and many are not paid for overtime. Moreover, the few good jobs in the restaurant industry tend to go to white workers.
The 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act links one’s legal status to one’s job, thus criminalizing undocumented labor. As a result, the threat of firing and deportation is used to silence workers who speak out or attempt to organize. Research from the Pew Hispanic Center in 2006 indicates that 24 percent of farmworkers, 12 percent of food preparation workers, and 27 percent of butchers and food processors are undocumented. Criminalizing immigrants allows politicians to avoid addressing the root causes of immigration—such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) which drove two million smallholders from the Mexican countryside—and the widespread abuses of immigrant labor, which undermines the position of all workers.

In order to achieve a more equitable food system, the criminalization of workers, enforced inequality, and the use of immigration policy as a system to supply cheap 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.

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