

FARM WORKER ISSUES: LOW WAGES

In the words of Cesar Chavez:

“(Farm workers) are involved in the planting and the cultivation and the harvesting of the greatest abundance of food known in this society. They bring in so much food to feed you and me and the whole country and enough food to export to other places. The ironic thing and the tragic thing is that after they make this tremendous contribution, they don’t have any money or any food left for themselves.”

Unfortunately, this paradox in our food system rings as true today as it did decades ago when Chavez spoke these words. The same farm workers who work hard to provide food to the country often struggle to make ends meet and provide food for themselves and their families. In fact, farm workers have the lowest annual family incomes of any U.S. wage & salary workers.

How much do farm workers earn?

Based on the most recent [National Agricultural Workers Survey \(NAWS\)](#)— a report published by the U.S. Department of Labor— the average total income of farm workers is between \$15,000 to \$17,499 a year for individuals and \$20,000 to \$24,999 for a family. Farm worker families’ income has not increased since 2009. However, this figure includes income that some farm workers earn from jobs outside agriculture. The federal poverty level for a family of 3 is \$19,790. Twenty-five percent of all farm workers had a family income below the federal poverty line.

The Piece Rate: Payment Based on Productivity

Most farm workers are paid based how many buckets or bags they pick of whatever crop they harvest—this is known as the “piece rate.” Payment in this format has some drawbacks. First of all, if workers are being paid by how much they pick, this acts as a disincentive to take breaks for water or shade, as taking breaks would cut into their productivity and thus cut into their pay.

Additionally, it’s possible for a farm worker being paid by piece rate to make less than the minimum wage. For instance, the piece rate for sweat potatoes in North Carolina averages 45 cents per 35 pound bucket. Average productivity for a worker is about 15 buckets per hour, which means that during an 8-hour workday, a worker will produce 120 buckets of sweat potatoes (or 4,375 pounds of sweat potatoes!). According to the 45 cents piece rate, a worker would receive only \$6.75 an hour, which is less than North Carolina’s \$7.25 minimum wage.

To compensate for this problem, as of 1966, federal law (Fair Labor Standards Act) requires employers on large farms to pay minimum wage if a worker doesn’t earn it based on the piece

rate. Unfortunately, there are loopholes to this system: about one-third of the nation's farm workers work on small farms and are not subject to federal law surrounding minimum wage.

Two important Washington State Supreme Court decisions are making the piece rate system fairer for farm workers in that state. In 2015, the court ruled that worker must also be paid a separate pay rate during rest breaks; and a 2018 ruling says piece rate workers are entitled to hourly compensation for time spent on other aspects of their jobs, such as work meetings, traveling between orchards and moving equipment.

Another common issue amongst farm workers is wage theft, in which a portion of a worker's wage is stolen by their employer or supervisor. Unfortunately, oversight on this is lax.

At the end of the day, a law is only as strong as its enforcement. In the case of workers in our country's fields, labor laws are poorly enforced at best, and at worst, farm workers are paid very little or no wages and are working under modern-day slavery conditions.

No Job Security

Other factors besides low wages also contribute to farm worker poverty. Many workers are day laborers, and migrant farm workers must chase crops to make a living. Farm workers are also constantly at the mercy of variable conditions like natural disasters and bad weather.

Finally, in addition to low wages and no job security, farm workers lack benefits that [labor laws](#) guarantee to workers in other industries. For instance, most farm workers do not receive overtime pay, nor do they get sick time or maternity leave.

Still, there is some hope for improvement: despite living in poverty and lacking enforcement of the laws that do exist, farm workers are organizing to improve these conditions. Check out our [Current Campaigns](#) to learn more about how farm workers across the country are banding together and demanding a fair wage for their hard work, and how NFWM and allies are supporting them in this struggle.

For sources and to learn more:

- National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS), U.S. Department of Labor
- United Farm Workers (UFW)
- Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC)
- "Compensating Farm Workers through Piece Rates: Implications on Harvest Costs and Worker Earnings"
- Wage and Hour Division, U.S. Department of Labor

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