

1 **4134. Rights of Farm Workers in the US**

2 The cries of the *harvesters* have reached the ears of the Lord of heavenly forces.

3 —James 5:4b [emphasis added]

4
5 Throughout Scripture we are taught the importance of respecting and rewarding work. The
6 prophets decried economic systems that denied workers fair compensation and dignity and
7 Christ’s ministry was centered on those individuals marginalized by society. Today, workers
8 whose hands gather the fruits of God’s good earth are among the most marginalized—both
9 economically and socially—in our communities. As the cries of the harvesters continue, we are
10 called as a church to respond.

11 Farm workers are the men women and children who climb for our apples, oranges and
12 peaches, stoop for our cucumbers and strawberries, and dig for our sweet potatoes. Eighty-five
13 percent of fruits and vegetables in the United States are handpicked by some of the nation’s most
14 vital workers, essential to the economic well-being of the United States. While conditions have
15 improved for some farm workers through successful, and long-fought, organizing campaigns, the
16 majority of farm workers continue to struggle with low wages, minimal legal protections, and
17 unhealthy work environments.

18 The average wage of the more than two million farm workers in the United States is \$11,000.
19 In some areas workers earn significantly less, often paid by piece rate earning as little as forty
20 cents per bucket of tomatoes or sweet potatoes collected. Women may receive less pay than men
21 for the same work and face sexual discrimination, harassment, and abuse by crew leaders who
22 control their jobs.

23 Agriculture is consistently ranked as one of the most dangerous occupations in the United
24 States. Farm workers face pesticide risks and suffer from the highest rate of toxic chemical
25 injuries and skin disorders of any workers in the country. Women who work in the fields have
26 given birth to babies with severe birth defects, attributed by many to pesticide exposure. In
27 recent years, workers across the United States have died in fields nationwide from heat exposure
28 combined with lack of drinking water, shade, or breaks.

29 Farm workers face numerous obstacles to receiving health care including lack of
30 transportation, lack of paid sick leave and risk of job loss if they miss work; only 10 percent of
31 farm workers report having employer-provided health insurance. Most farm workers are
32 immigrants who have come to the United States to seek a better life for their families. Many here
33 today were once farmers in their own countries who have been driven from their land, unable to
34 compete with the price of subsidized crops from the United States. At their workplace and in
35 communities in which they live here, these workers face discrimination and exploitation based
36 on ethnicity, socioeconomic and immigration status. An increasing number of farm workers
37 arrive through the H2-A guest worker program, some from as far away as Thailand. Isolated in
38 remote labor camps without transportation, these workers are in particular need of outreach,
39 support, and ministry from the community.

40 Farm workers were excluded from federal laws passed in the 1930's to protect workers, such as
41 the National Labor Relations Act and those mandating overtime pay and minimum wage. Few
42 states require overtime pay for farm workers and minimum wage statutes apply to workers on
43 large farms only. Laws designed to protect farm workers are often not enforced. Furthermore,
44 workers often fear firing or deportation if they speak up about abuses.

45 Farm workers call on us to stand in solidarity with them to change unjust conditions and
46 scripture calls us to respond. As Christians, we cannot sit silently as our brothers and sisters are
47 exploited and abused. We proclaim our outrage at their living and working conditions. Following
48 the teachings of Christ we must ensure that the men and women who harvest our food are invited
49 to share fully in the fruits of their labor.

50 *The United Methodist Church:*

51 •
52 publicly denounces any and all mistreatment of farm workers and repents of any complicity
53 that we hold as consumers and often-silent participants in and beneficiaries of an exploitive
54 food production and distribution system;

55 •
56 demands that employers treat farm workers and their families with dignity and respect; and
57 that corporate processors, food retailers, and restaurants take responsibility in proportion to
58 the power they possess for the treatment of the farm workers in their supply chains;

59 •
60 calls on the General Board of Church and Society, the General Board of Global Ministries,
61 annual conferences, and local churches to support state and federal legislation that would
62 strengthen the laws protecting farm workers' rights and provide the funding necessary for
63 adequate enforcement of laws protecting farm workers' rights, health, and safety;

64 •
65 celebrates that farm worker organizing campaigns have resulted in labor agreements
66 producing significant change in farm workers' lives, including wage increases, benefits,
67 pesticide protection, and treatment with respect;

- 68 •
- 69 commits itself to work in cooperation with the National Farm Worker Ministry whose
- 70 primary mission is supporting farm workers organizing for justice and empowerment;
- 71 •
- 72 urges annual conferences, especially where farm workers live and work, to use personal and
- 73 institutional resources to encourage recognition of farm workers' rights to a voice in the
- 74 agricultural industry, including representation and good faith bargaining;
- 75 •
- 76 urges local churches to identify and reach out to farm workers in their communities,
- 77 including those in the H2-A guest worker program;
- 78 •
- 79 urges local churches to hold a yearly service to remember and honor farm workers, including
- 80 worship, education and a call to action; and
- 81 •
- 82 urges the United Methodist Committee on Relief to consider the needs of farm workers when
- 83 administering relief efforts.

84 **ADOPTED 2008**

85 **resolution #4134 2008 *Book of Resolutions***

86 **resolution #236, 2004 *Book of Resolutions***

87 **resolution #223, 2000 *Book of Resolutions***

88 *See Social Principles, ¶ 163H.*

89