



## **Issues Affecting Farm Workers**

To feed the country, an estimated two and a half million farm workers labor in fields and on ranches across the United States. They handpick the vast majority of fruit and vegetable crops produced here. Farm workers are the backbone of our \$200 billion agricultural industry. To turn this system around, farm workers are organizing to demand a seat at the table with the people and institutions that have the ability to change their inhumane working and living conditions.

### **Just and Humane Immigration Reform**

Farm workers are the key to the U.S. food system, and although our population relies on their labor to put food on the table, these workers lack basic rights, face exploitation, and live in fear of reporting abuses. While farm workers run the gamut of being U.S. citizens, legal permanent residents, seasonal laborers on special guest worker visas, or undocumented workers, most are affected by immigration status. Ironically, immigrants in this “Nation of Immigrants” face great hostility, dealing with racism and discrimination. Many workers are faced with barriers to gaining citizenship, applying for federal support services, receiving education, or even legally operating a vehicle. Farm workers are often threatened with deportation for themselves or members of their families if they complain or report any exploitative conditions. These threats are directed to oppress groups from getting out of line, no matter the unethical treatment.

### **Farm workers & the environment**

The impacts of climate change are being felt all over the U.S. through higher temperatures, increased wildfires, prolonged droughts, frequent flooding, and more frequent/stronger hurricanes. Farm workers are on the front lines of climate change impact. As climate change forces significant agricultural adaptations and farmers are pressured to make shortcuts concerning labor, farm workers will feel the initial and most severe impacts on their working and living conditions.

### **U.S. Labor Laws**

Most farm workers lack basic labor protections such as workers’ compensation, health insurance, and disability insurance. Farm workers remain excluded from the federal protections of the National Labor Relations Act from 1935, which forbids employers from firing a worker for joining, organizing, or supporting a labor union. Unions neutralize the power imbalance between workers and growers, thus empowering workers to stand up and speak out about the injustices affecting them.

## **Low wages**

The great paradox of our food system is the very people who work to feed the U.S. struggle to feed their own families. In fact, farm workers have the lowest annual family incomes of any U.S. wage and salary workers. However, these numbers do not tell the whole story of the issues that farm workers face based on their low income. Many farm workers earn an income based on their productivity rate. This discourages taking breaks from the heat to meet a quota. Consequently, farm workers are less likely to be securely paid a minimum wage if they cannot meet the hourly picking rate for specific produce. While this is not an issue on large farms based on protections for minimum wage, many farm workers still work on small farms where this sort of wage theft is not protected.

## **Health and Safety**

Farm work is hard work. Farm workers perform repetitive picking motions, bend over for hours at a time, lift heavy buckets of produce, and operate machinery that can lead to mishaps and injuries on the job. Working against weather elements can also be deadly. Workers run the risk of heat-related injuries/ illnesses based on the incentive to work harder and faster without breaks. Physical contact with agrochemicals can also lead to unwanted sicknesses. Farm workers face an insurmountable task of getting health care based on a variety of reasons surrounding documentation status. The access to healthcare is disproportionate to the level of risk at work.

## **Housing**

Farm workers commonly face substandard housing conditions. Many workers pay high prices to live in crowded, unsanitary conditions which often lack basic utilities. A lot of farm workers also live in isolated areas far away from vital services, such as health clinics, grocery stores, and public transportation. Due to expensive rent, many workers or families will pack into one house, trailer, or apartment to afford their housing.

## **Children in the Fields**

Children farm workers run rampant in the infrastructure of agriculture in the United States, yet they are some of the least protected and advocated for demographics. Children 12 and older can work on farms, and they are excluded from many of the labor protection offered to children in other working sectors. While farm work is difficult for any who take part, children's small and growing bodies are especially vulnerable to the working conditions in agriculture. For example, children are more susceptible to heat-related illnesses and pesticide toxicity. Psychologically, children farm workers are tossed into an intense industry that can be extremely taxing on their emotional well-being. Many states have no limit on how much a child can work in agriculture, thus interfering with any time allotted to school.

## **Women in Agriculture**

While they play a vital role in harvesting the food on our plates, farm worker women are arguably the most exploited workers in this country. Females in the fields are often given the least desired, lowest-paying jobs, while they are the first to be laid off, receive fewer opportunities to advance, and face a culture of discrimination and machismo in the workplace. In other words, female farm workers endure nearly all the issues male farm workers face, as well as some that are largely unique, such as sexual harassment, gender discrimination, health risks of working while pregnant, and the extra responsibility of being the primary caregivers of children.