

2023

HARVEST OF JUSTICE: FARM WORKERS & RACISM



From slavery to sharecropping to exclusions in labor laws, our food system is rooted in racism. Today, our nation's farm workers continue to face challenges and risks connected to this legacy.

In the mid-1930s, the US passed several labor laws to protect workers but excluded farm workers and domestic laborers who were mostly Black. In 1935, the National Labor Rights Act (NLRA) provided the right to organize without retaliation - farm workers were excluded. In 1938, the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) created overtime rules and minimum wage, which did not include farm workers, again. Today, farm workers are still predominantly people of color, and while some FLSA items have been expanded to include farm workers, many of those protections have not.

One legislator from Florida argued in 1937 for the exclusion of farm workers from the FLSA stating on record, "You cannot put the Negro and the white man on the same basis and get away with it."

Over the years, individual states have sought to include farm workers, but very few have been successful. As of 2023, only eight states—California, Colorado, Hawaii, Maryland, Minnesota, New York, Oregon, and Washington—offer any overtime coverage for farm workers. There are still very few federal protections for farm workers around the nation. The "on record" reasons for why farm workers continue to be excluded varies, but racial injustice is still a primary reason.

Disparities for farm workers extend beyond labor laws into other parts of their daily lives. Even though agriculture is one of the most dangerous industries, most farm workers have no insurance, limited access to healthcare, and because of their low wages, cannot afford healthcare expenses out of pocket. In 2020, a study done in California found that COVID-19 cases were 2.5 times higher in farm worker communities than the state average.



Multiple studies have found that many employers, in order to save money and maximize output, provide little protection for workers against agrochemicals, like pesticides. A report from the Organic Center found that BIPOC communities in the U.S. endure a significantly disproportionate risk of exposure to pesticides and subsequent harms.

Farm worker housing is often next to fields, making them continuously exposed to pesticide drift and other agrochemicals. This housing is often substandard or overcrowded. Numerous negative health outcomes are linked to poor housing conditions and overcrowded spaces.

Language barriers make it difficult for farm workers to access health care and community resources, to read and understand safety labels and instructions for pesticides, as well as disaster-related communication. Additionally, a growing number of farm workers speak Indigenous languages or a language other than Spanish, and a lack of interpreting services makes them at risk every day for further exploitation and health disparities.

From exclusionary labor laws to the challenges mentioned above,, farm workers experience exploitative social and economic systems that impact their daily lives. To upend the unjust and racist agricultural system, farm workers are organizing to change their inhumane working and living conditions. You can be an ally to farm workers by raising awareness about issues affecting farm workers and supporting farm worker-led campaigns.

Reflection Questions:

- What are some of the major challenges farm workers face? Has that changed over time?
- How do you think racism plays a role in the farm labor industry and the fight for reform?
- What role do you think faith communities could play in overturning unjust and racist systems?
- How can you raise awareness about farm worker justice in your community?

Act!

Support farm worker led campaigns and initiatives across the country. Learn more and explore other educational resources at nfwm.org/harvestofjustice.

Prayer

God of Justice,
Open hearts to those who plant and harvest our crops.
Open eyes to see what is mostly unseen. Open hands to grasp the hands that pick our produce. Open doors to visit legislators for support. Open mouths to speak in solidarity with those who feed us.
Amen.

About Us

National Farm Worker Ministry educates and mobilizes people of faith and conscience to support farm worker led campaigns to improve farm workers' working and living conditions.

To learn more, visit nfwm.org

