

FOOD WORKERS AMONGST COUNTRY'S LOWEST PAID WORKERS



Americans have a penchant for talking about food in every manner possible. Where the best steaks are available? How best to barbecue one? Which sauce is good for a chicken dish and which is not? Recipes are discussed with excitement and vigor, by those who wouldn't know how to peel a potato. Food related TV programs are loved and admired. Yet, very few talk about the people behind the food industry, whose labors bring the food to our table, who pluck, pick, butcher, sort, process, and deliver this 1.8 trillion dollar industry. Even though they compose one-sixth of the nation's workforce, their plight is rarely discussed. The salary that is drawn by cooks, dishwashers, cafeteria attendants, Bartenders, butchers and others in this industry, compares very unfavorably with other professions in the country. A new report from the Food Chain Workers Alliance, says that a majority of the workers in Food Industry take home substandard wages and little benefits. Of the workers surveyed by FCWA, only 13.5 percent managed a livable wage. FCWA defines a livable wage one that is a hundred and fifty percent of the regional poverty level. Amazingly, of the 90 agricultural workers surveyed, not even one was found to be earning a life sustaining wage. The Food Chain Workers Alliance survey hammers home the sobering reality of jobs in, what the FCWA calls "the food chain", which is an enormous network of workers occupied in the production, processing, and distribution of food. There jobs were listed amongst the top twenty lowest paying jobs in the country, in a report by the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Joann Lo, Executive Director of the Food Chain Workers Alliance says, "Jobs in the food system aren't seen as high-skilled. It's hard work; you need to know the right way to cut a chicken in a poultry plant. But the general perception is that they are low-skilled and don't deserve good wages." An employee would need to earn a little more than \$18 an hour to afford a two-bedroom house, a basic requirement for a small family. According to the report, the Fair Market Rent for such an accommodation is \$949 a month. The unfortunate fact is that workers, at \$9.28 an hour, make around half the amount required. Workers with a college degree earn a little more, but even that's not enough. These wages are also low for those employees who are paid "piece-rate" rather than hourly. Their earnings are proportionate to their work output, which depends on their physical health and supply fluctuations. Journalist Tracie McMillan, who wrote an intimate account of the conditions under which workers work in the food chain, went incognito to a garlic farm and got employed on piece-work basis. Her report entitled, *The American Way of Eating*, makes for poignant reading. "Even though Rosalinda's tarjeta will show that she came in at 5:30 a.m. and left at 2:30 p.m., a nine-hour day, her check will say she was there for two hours—exactly the number of hours she would have had to work at minimum wage (\$8) to earn what she made via piece rate (\$16). Later, I ask advocates if this is unusual, and everyone shrugs: Not every contractor does it, but they see it regularly. Earning minimum wage at our piece rate would require a speed that seems impossible: five buckets an hour. (In my month in garlic, I do not meet anyone who can average that for an entire day.)" Apart from the abysmally low pay, most of the food workers surveyed by the Alliance lacked benefits such as healthcare and paid sick days. The some who did have health care benefits, were either unaware of their benefits or were not adequately covered. Even though most employers acknowledge that good wages and improved working conditions will result in better turnover and overall be more productive and fruitful for the company and the employees. But that is not how things are. Employers allege that low standards across the food industry, force them to cut costs and keep labor costs down. The employers are under tremendous pressure from the big buyers, like Walmart, who owing to their buying capacities, force the sellers to sell at very competitive prices, leaving them with no choice but to cut down their expenses – workers become the first casualty. Joann Lo, Executive Director of the Food Chain Workers Alliance says that in spite of the depressing report, the 13.5 percent workers who are earning a livable wage is evidence that it "is important to note because it shows that it is possible for food systems employers to pay fair wages and still do well, and make a profit." Featherstone Farm, an organic Minnesota farm pays it workers by the hour and also provides temporary workers with housing. Lo suggests that unionization and the capacity to organize themselves, can be important factors that could positively impact the workers conditions. Moreover, it was time that the minimum wage of tip workers, like waiters was increased, "their minimum wage has been \$2.13 an hour for the past 21 years.