

# *Food First* BACKGROUND

INSTITUTE FOR FOOD AND DEVELOPMENT POLICY

SUMMER 2010

VOLUME 16 • NUMBER 2



*Photo by David Bacon*

## **Food Workers - Food Justice:** *Linking food, labor and immigrant rights*

By Eric Holt-Giménez, Zoe Brent & Annie Shattuck

The food movement in the US is growing stronger, but too often the people who work in our food system are overlooked. Some 17% of all U.S. jobs are in the food sector.<sup>i</sup> Many of these jobs are carried out by undocumented immigrant workers. Consequently, food workers are the lowest paid and most under-protected workers in the nation. Low wages and substandard working conditions subsidize the enormous profits of the food industry and puts the triple burden of poverty, labor abuse and food insecurity on those most vulnerable. The movement for food justice cannot thrive in a system where food workers are criminalized, exploited, and going hungry.

### **Labor in the Corporate Food System**

In 2009, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics listed food preparation and serving-related occupations as the lowest paid of all occupational categories (\$8.59 median wage), followed by farming, fishing and forestry (\$9.34 median wage). Twenty-five percent of grocery workers experience minimum wage violations.<sup>ii</sup> On-the-job injuries are common. According to Oxfam, in 2004 farm-workers suffered the highest rates of toxic chemical injuries, with an estimated 300,000 pesticide poisonings yearly.<sup>iii</sup>

A decline in union representation—from 35% to 12% since World War II—parallels the spread of poor labor conditions, dependence on undocumented labor and corporate concentration.<sup>iv</sup> Aggressive anti-union campaigns and recruitment of temporary or foreign workers hinder organizing efforts and keep labor costs painfully low. Real wages for meatpacking workers fell from \$20/hr in 1977 to \$10.50/hr in 2001, while consolidation of the beef packing industry increased drastically.<sup>v</sup> By 1999 the top four firms controlled 80% of the market—more than doubling in two decades.<sup>vi</sup> Meanwhile,

rates of undocumented workers have risen to an estimated 20 to 50% of the workforce.<sup>vii</sup> Sadly, this kind of exploitation is not unique to meatpacking, but also common in the field, the store, and the restaurant.

**In The Field:** The women and men who harvest, pack, process and serve our food can't afford to feed their own families healthy food. Research conducted by the California Institute for Rural Studies (CIRS) (2007) in Fresno County, CA—the state's breadbasket—found that 45% of farm workers surveyed were food insecure and 48% were on food stamps—more than double the national average.<sup>viii</sup> Since job opportunities and wage rates are key determinants of food security, it is safe to assume that food workers are among the most insecure. Their dependence on cheap, processed food as a source of needed calories results in high rates of obesity and diet-related illnesses. Another survey done by the CIRS in 1999 of farm workers in six regions throughout California found that 81% of males and 76% of females were overweight and 28% and 37% were obese, respectively.<sup>ix</sup>

**In The Store:** In food retail, permanent, economically secure jobs are being replaced with temporary contract work. Labor contractors provide large firms with short-term workers for low-wage, low-skill jobs. Why? All personnel, insurance and labor issues relating to those employees automatically become the responsibility of the contract agent. In this way, big corporations can wash their hands of responsibility for inhumane or unfair job conditions—even as they profit from exploited labor. As Safeway spokeswoman, Susan Houghton stated when asked about the unfair and unhealthy labor conditions of Safeway's janitors, "We just contract with these companies to provide services... This is something you need to talk to the vendors about."<sup>x</sup> Workers bouncing from job to job are less likely to organize and unionize than workers with job security and legal residency. This undermines labor rights and

long-term economic security for all workers, encouraging a "race to the bottom" in the labor market.

**In The Restaurant:** Jobs in the restaurant business have grown significantly faster than jobs in other sectors in the past decade, but the benefits of growth do not necessarily filter down to workers. At \$2.13 an hour, the federal minimum wage for tipped workers has not changed in 19 years, in fact it fell 37% in real terms since it was established in 1991. According to the [National Employment Law Project](#), tipped workers have twice the poverty rate of other workers.<sup>xi</sup>

Wages are only the tip of the iceberg. The [Restaurant Opportunities Center](#) study of working conditions in five major cities found that some 90% of restaurant workers did not have health insurance or paid sick days, nearly 70% said they worked even when they were ill, and some 40% were not paid for overtime. Moreover, the few good jobs in the restaurant industry tend to go to white workers over people of color. The median income of white restaurant workers is 22% higher than for workers of color. The Center also found that white job seekers are 25% more likely to get interviews than workers of color with similar qualifications.<sup>xii</sup>

### **Immigration: the key issue—the false debate**

Recent anti-immigrant legislation in the state of Arizona allows law officers to detain and arrest any person suspected of being undocumented. By criminalizing immigrants, this discriminatory law allows politicians to avoid addressing the causes of migration and the widespread abuses of immigrant labor, thus undermining the position of all workers—especially in the food system.

Current immigration law rewards labor abuses. Fines for violating the National Labor Relations Act (NRLA) are minimal. The 1986

Immigration Reform and Control Act links one's legal status to one's job, criminalizing undocumented labor. As a result, firing and the threat of deportation are used to silence workers who speak out or attempt to organize. The use of undocumented labor is remarkably profitable for industry. In California—the richest agricultural state in the nation—undocumented immigrants' *gross economic contribution* through sales, income, and property taxes, was \$45,000/person (including children) in 1994. Yet the workers were paid an average of \$8,840 each. The difference is profit that goes directly to industry—primarily construction, agriculture, food processing, restaurants and services.<sup>xiii</sup>

Little attention is paid to why people migrate in the first place. Free trade agreements allow the US to dump its surplus of subsidized grain abroad where it sells at prices well under the costs of production. Since 1994, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) has bankrupted much of rural Mexico, driving over two million smallholders out of the countryside.<sup>xiv</sup> The very same companies that benefit from NAFTA also save on labor costs by actively recruiting those same smallholders as undocumented workers to fill underpaid jobs.<sup>xv</sup> Research from the Pew Hispanic Center in 2006 indicates that some 24% of farm workers, 12% of food preparation workers, and 27% of butchers and food processors are undocumented.<sup>xvi</sup>

### **Linking food justice with worker and immigrant rights**

Addressing worker and immigrants rights in the food system is a key step toward community food security and food sovereignty—the democratic control over our food systems.

Fixing federal and state policy is essential, but the grassroots are not waiting for leadership from above. Workers, farmers and activists are already busy changing the labor landscape in the food system:



CIW Protesting Burger King in Miami - Photo by NESRI

**In the Field:** The *Coalition of Immokalee Workers*, in alliance with the student-led Fair Food Challenge, have successfully campaigned to end modern-day slavery in Florida's tomato fields. Their combined pressure convinced Taco Bell, McDonald's, Burger King, Whole Foods and others to buy only from growers who agreed to pay another penny a pound to pickers.

*Swanton Berry Farms* of Davenport, CA, the first organic farm to invite and sign a union contract with the United Farm Workers, provides a union wage, health benefits, subsidized housing, and stock options to career-oriented farmworkers.

**In the Store:** Twenty-two percent of all grocery store workers belong to a union or are covered by union contracts, compared with 14 percent in other industries. The benefits of union contracts are striking. Unionized women earn on average 11.2% more than their non-union counterparts. Young workers earn 12.4% more. Workers in chain stores are more likely to be unionized or covered by contracts than workers in independent grocery stores, but new independent models are emerging as well.<sup>xvii</sup>

The new People's Grocery Market and Mandela Marketplace in Oakland, California base their business models on worker-ownership and a community

service mission to bring fresh healthy produce and good jobs to low-income neighborhoods.

**In the Restaurant:** The [Restaurant Opportunities Center](#) recommends an immediate increase in the minimum wage for tipped workers, paid sick days, and access to health insurance, as well as what they call

"high road" practices to "assist and encourage employers to provide living wages, basic workplace benefits, and opportunities for advancement to restaurant workers." Such initiatives include rent and property tax incentives for employers who implement exceptional workplace practices, subsidies to employment-based health insurance and collective health insurance provisions. The Center's worker-owned restaurant already follows "high road practices" while paying workers a genuine living wage.

The Restaurant Opportunities Center, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers and at least one United Food and Commercial Workers local are all members of a new coalition—the *Food Chain Workers Alliance*—fighting for fairness from farm to fork.

These are just a few examples of a growing movement beginning to link food and labor justice. In order to achieve a more equitable food system, the criminalization of workers, enforced inequality, and the use of immigration policy as a supply system for exploited labor, all need to change. A fair deal for food workers is an essential part of the foundation of an equitable, sustainable food system. Understanding food justice as a labor issue—and labor as a food justice issue—is an important step in this direction.

## NOTES

- i. Beck, M. et. al. (2006). *Agribusiness 2006*. Washington DC, Industrial College of the Armed Forces.
- ii. Bernhardt, A. et. al. (2009). *Broken Laws, Unprotected Workers: Violations of Employment and Labor Laws in America's Cities*. New York, National Employment Law Project, Murphy Institute for Worker Education and Labor Studies at CUNY, Center for Urban Economic Development, Cornell, Rutgers, UCLA.
- iii. Oxfam (2004). *Like Machines in the Fields: Workers without rights in American agriculture. Trading Away Our Rights: Women Working in Global Supply Chains*, Oxfam America: 76.
- iv. Bacon, D. (2005). *Unions at War*. San Francisco Bay Guardian, 8/10/05. (accessed Aug. 2009).
- v. Kotalik, C. (2007). *Immigrant Workers Buck Long Slide in Meatpacking Raids Follow as Backlash*. LaborNotes. 335.
- vi. MacDonald, J. M. et. al. (2000). *Consolidation in U.S. Meatpacking*. Agricultural Economic Report. USDA. Washington DC, USDA: 47.
- vii. Champlin, D. and Hake, E. (2006). "Immigration as Industrial Strategy in American Meatpacking." *Review of Political Economy* 18(1): 49-70.
- viii. Wirth, C. et. al. (2007). *Hunger in the Fields: Food Insecurity Among Farmworkers in Fresno County*, California Institute for Rural Studies: 36.
- ix. Don Villarejo, et. al. (2000). *Suffering in Silence: A Report on the Health of California's Agricultural Workers*. California Institute of Rural Studies, The California Endowment: 38.
- x. Arrieta, R. (2009). *Janitors Challenge Grocery Chains on Health, Safety Standards*. Working in These Times, Oct. 22, 2009. (accessed Nov. 1, 2009).
- xi. Nayak, R. D. and Sonn, P.K. (2009). *Restoring the Minimum Wage for America's Tipped Workers*. New York, Washington DC, National Employment Law Project: 28.
- xii. Restaurant Opportunities Centers United. (2010). *Behind the Kitchen Door: A Summary of Restaurant Industry Studies in New York, Chicago, Metro Detroit, New Orleans, and Maine*: 2.
- xiii. Urban Institute, (1994) Cited in, Bacon, D. (2008). *Illegal People; How Globalization Creates Migration and Criminalizes Immigrants*. Boston, Beacon Press.
- xiv. Stiglitz, J. and Charlton, S. (2005). *Fair Trade for All: How Trade Can Promote Development*. New York, Oxford University Press.
- xv. Human Rights Watch (2004). *Blood, Sweat and Fear: Workers' Rights in U.S. Meat and Poultry Plants*. New York, NY, Human Rights Watch; Tanger, S. E. (2006). "Enforcing Corporate Responsibility for Violations of Workplace Immigration Laws: The Case of Meatpacking." *Harvard Latino Review* 59: 59-90; Champlin, D. and Hake, E. (2006). "Immigration as Industrial Strategy in American Meatpacking." *Review of Political Economy* 18(1): 49-70.
- xvi. Passel, J. S. (2006). *The Size and Characteristics of the Unauthorized Migrant Population in the U.S. Estimates Based on the March 2005 Current Population Survey*. Washington DC, Pew Hispanic Center: 23.
- xvii. Lovell, V. et. al. (2002). *The Benefits of Unionization for Workers in the Retail Food Industry*. Washington D.C., Institute for Women's Policy Research: 38.

## MEMBER BENEFITS:

- 20% discount on Food First books
- Quarterly Food First News & Views and Backgrounders. Call or write for copies to share with friends
- Donate \$100-\$499 - one free Food First book or T-shirt.
- Donate \$500-\$999 - Two free Food First books or T-shirts.
- Donate \$1,000 or more - receive all Food First materials.

SAVE PAPER, POSTAGE, AND TIME BY JOINING OUR *SUSTAINERS' CIRCLE*

For as little as \$10 a month, you can be a vital part of...

# sustaining FOOD FIRST

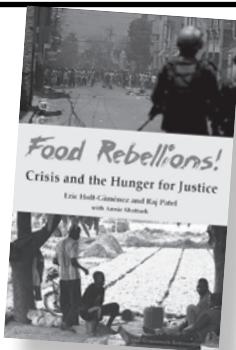
Support Food First with easy, automatic monthly donations through your credit card or checking account.

Call (510) 654-4400 or email [info@foodfirst.org](mailto:info@foodfirst.org) for details

### **Food Rebellions! Crisis and the Hunger for Justice**

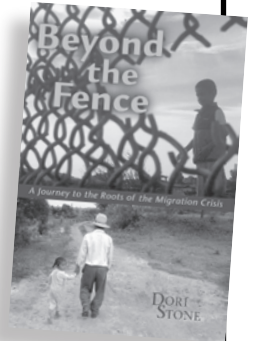
by Eric Holt-Giménez and Raj Patel, with Annie Shattuck. Today there are over a billion hungry people on the planet, more than ever before in history. Why, in a time of record harvests, are a record number of people going hungry? And why are a handful of corporations making record profits? *Food Rebellions!* tells the real story behind the global food crisis and documents the growing trend of grassroots solutions to hunger spreading around the world. Official plans to solve the world food crisis call for more free trade and technical fixes--solutions that have already failed. *Food Rebellions!* is a trail marker on the journey to end hunger and build food sovereignty. \$19.95

To book one of the authors for a college or other community event, contact Martha Katigbak-Fernandez at (510) 654-4400 ext. 221



**Beyond the Fence: A Journey to the Roots of the Migration Crisis**, by Dori Stone, informs the immigration debate in the U.S., which is highly controversial, emotional, and often confusing. She explores migration issues that are largely unnoticed by the public in the U.S. and the mainstream media - the stories and surprising possibilities that get lost in the debate over fences and undocumented migrants exploited at below minimum wage. They are the tales of people's desperation and ir retrievable loss, but also their growing visions of

hope. They are the stories of farmers, politicians and activists on both sides of the border. "The book is ideally suited for students, but I can think of few people who would not benefit from reading it." - Angus Wright, author of *The Death of Ramon Gonzales: The Modern Agricultural Dilemma*. Beyond the Fence, \$16.95



## BOOKS FROM FOOD FIRST

**Agrofuels in the Americas** edited by Richard Jonasse, explores the impact of agrofuel production in the Global South, where the rural poor and indigenous populations are losing their access to land, and with it, the ability to feed themselves coupled with rising food prices due to the diversion of land to fuel crops.

Authors include Miguel Altieri and Elizabeth Bravo, Eric Holt-Giménez and Isabella Kenfield, Gretchen Gordon and Jessica Aguirre, Richard Jonasse, Maria Luisa Mendonça, Laura Hurtado, Annie Shattuck, and Rachel Smolker and Brian Tokar. \$18.95



**Caminos: The Immigrant's Trail**  
The companion 20-minute documentary DVD, suitable for classroom use, includes a study guide. \$20.00

**To order these and other Food First books, go to [www.foodfirst.org](http://www.foodfirst.org) or call us at 510-654-4400**

## JOIN FOOD FIRST AND TELL YOUR FRIENDS

more info at [www.foodfirst.org](http://www.foodfirst.org)

**FOODFIRST**

INSTITUTE FOR FOOD AND DEVELOPMENT POLICY

398 60TH STREET • OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA 94618 USA • TEL: (510) 654-4400 • EMAIL [FOODFIRST@FOODFIRST.ORG](mailto:FOODFIRST@FOODFIRST.ORG)

©2009 BY FOOD FIRST. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. PLEASE OBTAIN PERMISSION TO COPY