

Food Policy for Food Justice: # 4

Food Justice, Food Workers and a Living Wage

2019



In March 2019, the Michigan Legislature raised Michigan's minimum wage to \$9.45 — less than half of the \$24.20 per hour calculated as a living wage for a household with two working adults and two children.

Workers in the food industry earn even less. Employers are allowed to paid tipped workers as little as \$3.59 an hour. Imagine working for

those wages and relying on the generosity of the general public—especially when larger numbers of people in the US are experiencing poverty.

Because of the many minimum wage exemptions in agriculture and the legal practice of paying piecework wages, Michigan's migrant farm workers average \$4 to \$5 an hour for backbreaking work in often hazardous conditions. Working within a piecework model also encourages these workers to enlist the aid of their children, while employers illegally look the other way.

A living wage differs from a minimum wage. It takes into account inflation and addresses what an individual actually needs to earn in order to live in the current economy. Many organizers around the country are calling for a \$15 an hour minimum wage and have won campaigns to get such an hourly wage passed.



These \$15 an hour campaigns are mostly being organized by workers in the food industry, restaurant workers, those in retail and the fast food industry. These food industry workers have been among the most exploited in the US in recent decades. They are challenging a system that has made billions in profits by paying low wages.

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Almost all workers in the food industry earn an unjust wage—from migrant workers and those working in food processing plants to grocery store clerks and people in restaurants, institutional food cafeterias and fast food chains. In both the restaurant and agriculture industries, minimum wage laws do not apply. Migrant workers are at the mercy of whatever farm owners want to pay them; people working for tips in restaurants have a whole different minimum wage standard applied to them.



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As an organization that promotes and practices food justice, Our Kitchen Table (OKT) supports the efforts of food workers who are organizing to demand a livable wage and better working conditions. Check these out:

- Restaurant Organizing Committee, rocunited.org
- Fast Food Forward fastfoodforward.org
- The migrant worker group, Coalition of Immokalee Workers, ciw-online.org

OKT knows that more and more people want to eat local, nutritious food that is chemical- and GMO-free. However, it is equally important that we demand that growers, migrant workers, restaurant workers and fast food workers be paid a living wage, have safe working conditions and have the right to organize fellow workers.

When we enter a grocery store, shop at a farmers market, eat at a restaurant or look at food labels, we should ask:

- **How were the workers who provided us with this food treated?**
- **What is the wage that these food workers make?**
- **Is it a living wage?**
- **Do these food workers have the right to organize?**
- **Does this food we are about to purchase and eat promote food justice?**

OKT recognizes that workers in the food industry need justice as well!



OKTjustice.org
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616-206-3641



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