Food Policy for Food Justice: Food Justice, Food Workers and a Living Wage

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—even 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.

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?

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The movement for Food Justice is changing Food Apartheid. Armed with the notion that everyone has the right to eat healthy, food justice advocates engage in more locally grown food projects, sharing skills on how to grow, prepare and preserve food, while exposing the current food system’s unjust nature.

The Food Justice Movement is an international movement that is ultimately fighting for Food Sovereignty, where everyone has say in the kind of food systems they want. Food Sovereignty is Food Democracy, where healthy food is a right for everyone—not just for those who can afford it. Here is a list of Food Justice principles that Our Kitchen Table supports and promotes:

- Food Justice recognizes that the causes of food disparity are the result of multiple systems of oppression. To practice food justice we must do the work through an intersectional lens.
- Food Justice advocates must focus on working with the most marginalized and vulnerable populations: communities of color, communities in poverty, immigrants, children, our elders, women, people who identify as LGBTQ, those with disabilities and people experiencing homelessness.
- Food Justice require us to work towards the elimination of exploitation in our food system, both exploitation of humans and animals.
- Food Justice demands that we grow food in such a way that preserves ecological biodiversity and promotes sustainability in all aspects.
- Provide resources and skill sharing so that people can be collectively more food self-sufficient.

Eating Healthy Food is a Right! The current global food system must be resisted and dismantled. For more information on ways to practice Food Justice in your community, contact Our Kitchen Table.