

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.

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.



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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Our Kitchen Table believes that these injustices need to be fought and the fight needs to be led by women of color. While providing temporary relief, food handouts and food assistance, are not the answer. We need a food system where women of color and communities of color play an intricate role in determining the kind of food they eat, how it is produced and who benefits from that food production.

Organizations like Via Campesina, Navdanya and the Coalition of Immokalee Workers all recognize the vital role that women play in food justice and food sovereignty movements. Our Kitchen Table is committed to playing this same role in West Michigan, empowering women of color to have a voice in determining the kind of food system they want.

We see women of color creating food justice in the following ways:

- **Having real access to healthy and nutritious food** through growing, preserving and preparing their own food. We do this by offering food growing resources and operating neighborhood-based farmers markets.
- **Changing school food policies** to guarantee that their children eat healthy, nutritious meals, made fresh daily. We do this by supporting food growing projects and local schools with students and parents.
- **Sharing knowledge and skills** on food growing, food preparation, seed saving and food preservation. The more women have these skills and share them with each other, the more influence they will have in creating a food justice movement. We do this by hosting forums, workshops and creating educational materials on food justice.
- **Challenging local restaurants** to prepare food that is local, fresh, culturally relevant and does not use exploitative labor, including those who pick the food, prepare the food and serve the food.
- **Demanding that the City of Grand Rapids allow women of color to garden on vacant, city-owned land** for food production in their neighborhoods.



For more information on the food growing and food justice work of Our Kitchen Table, contact us at OKTable1@gmail.com.



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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 animal s.
- 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.



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