



FARM WORKER ISSUES: LOW WAGES

In the words of **Cesar Chavez**:

"(Farm workers) are involved in the planting and the cultivation and the harvesting of the greatest abundance of food known in this society. They bring in so much food to feed you and me and the whole country and enough food to export to other places. The ironic thing and the tragic thing is that after they make this tremendous contribution, they don't have any money or any food left for themselves."

Unfortunately, this paradox in our food system rings as true today as it did decades ago when Chavez spoke these words. The same farm workers who work hard to provide food to the country often struggle to make ends meet and provide food for themselves and their families. In fact, farm workers have the lowest annual family incomes of any U.S. wage and salary workers.

How much do farm workers earn?

Based on the most recent National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS)-- a report published by the U.S. Department of Labor-- farm workers work 42 hours per week and earn \$7.25 per hour on average, but this "average" varies greatly. For example, workers who have worked for the same employer for multiple years earn more than other workers. Those who have been with an employer for a year or less earn an average of \$6.76 per hour, and those who have been with the same employer for at least 6 years earn an average of \$8.05 per hour.

Annually, the average income of crop workers is between \$10,000 to \$12,499 for individuals and \$15,000 to \$17,499 for a family. To give you an idea, the federal poverty line is \$10,830 for an individual or \$22,050 for a family of four (in 2009).

Thus, according to NAWS, 30% of all farm workers had total family incomes below the poverty line.

The Piece Rate: Payment Based on Productivity

Most farm workers are paid based how many buckets or bags they pick of whatever crop they harvest—this is known as the "piece rate." Payment in this format has some drawbacks.

First of all, if workers are being paid by how much they pick, this acts as a disincentive to take breaks for water or shade, as taking breaks would cut into their productivity and thus cut into their pay.

Additionally, it's possible for a farm worker being paid by piece rate to make less than the minimum wage. For instance, the piece rate for orange juice in Florida is 85 cents per 90-pound box of oranges. Average productivity for a worker is 8 boxes per hour, which means that during an 8-hour workday, a worker will produce 64 boxes of oranges (or 5,760 pounds of oranges!). According to the 85 cents piece rate, a worker would receive only \$6.80 an hour, which is significantly less than Florida's \$7.31 minimum wage (as of 2011).



Youth & Young Adult Network of the National Farm Worker Ministry

www.nfwm-yaya.org

To compensate for this problem, as of 1966, federal law requires employers on large farms to pay minimum wage if a worker doesn't earn it based on the piece rate. Unfortunately, there are loopholes to this system.

For one, about one-third of the nation's farm workers work on small farms, and these are not subject to federal law surrounding minimum wage. If a farm worker is hired through crew leaders or farm labor contractors, which approximately one half of all farm workers are, then their growers can avoid state and federal-level employment laws, including minimum wage. Another common issue amongst farm workers is wage theft, in which a portion of a worker's wage is stolen by their employer or supervisor. Unfortunately, oversight on this is lax.

At the end of the day, a law is only as strong as its enforcement. In the case of workers in our country's fields, labor laws are poorly enforced at best, and at worst, farm workers are paid very little or no wages and work under **modern slavery conditions**.

No Job Security

Other factors besides low wages also contribute to farm worker poverty. Farm worker unemployment rates are double those of all wage and salary workers according to the 2008 NAWS, as agricultural work by nature provides virtually no job security.

Many workers are day laborers, and migrant farm workers must chase crops to make a living. Farm workers are also constantly at the mercy of variable conditions like natural disasters and bad weather.

Finally, in addition to low wages and no job security, farm workers lack benefits that **labor laws** guarantee to workers in other industries. For instance, farm workers do not receive overtime pay, nor do they get sick time or maternity leaves.

History has been grim for farm workers' wages; on the whole, rather than increasing over time, farm worker wages have actually declined by more than 20% in the past twenty years after accounting for inflation.

Still, there is some hope for improvement: despite living in poverty and lacking enforcement of the laws that do exist, farm workers are organizing to improve these conditions.

Sources:

- *National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS), U.S. Department of Labor*
- *United Farm Workers*
- "Compensating Farm Workers through Piece Rates: Implications on Harvest Costs and Worker Earnings"
- *Wage and Hour Division, U.S. Department of Labor*

