

The Role of Human Rights Protections in Sustainable Food Systems

“Something is sustainable if it does not degrade the resources upon which it depends.”
—Student Farm Manager, Chez Panisse, Berkeley, CA

The sustainable food movement concerns itself with the way food is grown, raised and produced. It seeks to build a holistic food system that is healthier, safe for the environment, and humane. To realize this vision, however, it is necessary to look beyond soil, animals, and small farm owners, to the human beings whose labor feeds the world.

The vast majority of agriculture in the United States today depends on farmworkers to plant, cultivate, pick, and pack the fruits and vegetables we eat. Indeed, in all but name, farmworkers are the farmers of the 21st century. But they are more than the sum of their labor. They are human beings with fundamental rights that the sustainable food movement must support if “good” food is to be “fair” food, too.

Human rights of farmworkers include:

- Decent wages
- Freedom from violence and intimidation
- Freedom from forced labor
- The ability to lodge effective complaints against abuses
- Protection for health and safety
- Access to clean water
- Freedom to organize without fear of retaliation

FARMWORKER FACTS¹

- ⇒ Sub-poverty wages of \$10,000 a year
- ⇒ Six successful federal prosecutions for forced labor and slavery
- ⇒ Consistent use of coercion and violence
- ⇒ Ineffective complaint mechanisms
- ⇒ Little to no enforcement of worker health and safety standards
- ⇒ No protection for the right to association or collective bargaining

Food production is not sustainable if it is undertaken at the cost of labor exploitation and the degradation of basic human rights. Senator Bernie Sanders has described the current conditions under which farmworkers labor in Florida, **“The norm is disaster, the extreme is slavery.”**

Even companies that have expressed a commitment to sustainable food must buy produce from the very growers who keep the people that bring food to families across the country in severe poverty and sweatshop conditions. But increasingly, the sustainable food community is speaking out against cheap fresh produce picked at the expense of human dignity. Significantly, the broader community and, in particular large food purchasers and consumers, are recognizing that they are the ones that have the power to change this abusive system.

“No major social or economic system may be permitted to function at the expense of basic human rights; the food system is no exception. There are viable solutions in agriculture that ensure the human rights of farmworkers, while also better protecting sustainable and healthy food production.”

—Larry Cox, Executive Director, Amnesty International U.S.A.

The founding members of the Alliance for Fair Food are: Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., RFK Memorial Center for Human Rights, National Economic and Social Rights Initiative, Student/Farmworker Alliance, Interfaith-Action of Southwest Florida. To learn more about these solutions and the sustainable food leaders who are supporting them, please visit the Alliance for Fair Food website at, www.allianceforfairfood.org. For a review of some of the most powerful consumer movements in history see the reverse side of this fact sheet.

Changing History Through Consumer Movements For Human Rights



- In 1787, the people of Manchester, England, delivered a petition containing more than 10,000 signatures – almost one in every five people in Manchester at the time – to the British House of Commons, demanding that the British government outlaw the brutal Transatlantic Slave Trade. Hundreds of thousands followed suit. This marked the launch of an unprecedented popular campaign that – in conjunction with innumerable slave revolts and full-scale rebellions across the Atlantic – would eventually result in the abolition of the British slave trade in 1807. It also marked a watershed moment in the birth of the modern human rights movement. The British abolitionist campaign introduced many of the tools used today in efforts to protect and expand human rights, from the mass petition

drive to the consumer boycott, as hundreds of thousands of British consumers refused to purchase sugar produced by slave labor.

- Started in 1955, the Montgomery Bus Boycott was a year-long protest in Montgomery, Alabama, that became a catalyst for desegregating the southern United States due to the courageous efforts of civil rights activists. This led to the 1956 decision by the Supreme Court of the United States declaring segregated seating on buses unconstitutional. Forty-two thousand black residents of Montgomery participated in the boycott. After 381 days of taking taxis, carpooling, and walking hostile streets, African Americans eventually won their fight to desegregate seating on public buses, not only in Montgomery, but throughout the United States.



- In the 1980's people and governments around the world launched an international campaign to boycott the South African government. Some countries banned the import of South African products, and citizens of many countries pressured major companies to pull out of South Africa. These actions crippled the South African economy and weakened the government. Students across the United States set up "tent cities" at their universities and camped out demanding that the university leadership divest any holdings in South Africa. The global divestment and boycott movement led to the dismantling of the vicious and racist system of apartheid that had been formally in place in South Africa for over four decades. South Africa drafted a new constitution and held its first free elections in 1994, leading to Nelson Mandela, one of anti-apartheid's greatest freedom fighters, ascending to the presidency of South Africa.



- In March of 2005, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) won their first boycott against Taco Bell. After four years of struggle, and with the support of the religious, student activist, and human rights community, the CIW entered into a precedent setting agreement with Taco Bell that nearly doubles wages by giving workers an additional penny per pound for tomatoes they pick, and a voice in the fields. The agreement imposes a zero tolerance policy on forced labor and slavery given that there have been six successful slavery prosecutions against sub-contractors in Florida's fields freeing over 1,000 workers collectively. Finally, the agreements includes a participatory code of conduct to eradicate the abuse and labor exploitation endemic in Florida's agriculture fields. This agreement opened the door for negotiations with other large food purchasers, and led to agreements with McDonald's and Burger King soon thereafter. The ongoing campaign promises to fundamentally alter the role of farmworkers in Florida's billion-dollar agricultural industry. It also provides a blueprint for change for other low-wage workers toiling throughout the nation's trillion dollar food industry, with ramifications across the country and possibly the globe.



1. *Like Machines in the Fields: Workers without Rights in American Agriculture*, Oxfam, America, March 2004.