The US food system employs roughly 21.5 million people, 14 percent of the nation’s entire workforce, while paying the lowest hourly median wage to frontline workers of any industry. The annual median wage for food chain workers in the United States is $16,000 and the hourly median wage is $10, well below the median wages across all industries of $36,468 and $17.53, respectively. The 2016 US living wage is $15.84 per hour before taxes.

Most food chain workers—those employed in producing, harvesting, processing, distributing, selling, and serving food—also experience widespread exploitation, harassment, and poor working conditions. Workers of color, women, and undocumented immigrants are especially vulnerable to abuses in the food system, which constitute human rights violations.

These abuses include wage theft, pesticide exposure and poisoning, child labor, long work hours with few breaks, racial and ethnic discrimination, unsafe working conditions, sexual harassment, and lack of access to health benefits. Significant racial and gender wage gaps exist. For every dollar earned by white men working in the food chain, Latino men earned 76 cents, Black men 60 cents, Asian men 81 cents, and Native men 44 cents. White women earned less than half of their white male counterparts, at 47 cents to every dollar. Women of color faced both a racial and a gender penalty: Black women earned 42 cents, Latina women 45 cents, Asian women 58 cents, and Native women 36 cents for every dollar earned by white men.

Rates of workplace injury and illness for food workers have risen since 2010 with widespread worker exploitation seen across all sectors of the food system. Workers are often afraid to speak up about these conditions due to fear of retaliation or deportation.
Since its adoption in 2012, the Good Food Purchasing Program has provided a platform for Los Angeles Unified School District to:

- Direct more than 20 percent of its purchases—a total of $30 million each year—to local foods
- Support the creation of more than 220 jobs
- Award union contracts to 400 food distribution workers

OVERVIEW, CONT.

Food workers bring food to consumers’ tables and contribute greatly to the economy. However, eight out of ten of the lowest-paying jobs in the country are food system jobs.6 Due to poverty wages, food chain workers experience high degrees of food insecurity, defined as the lack of access to affordable, nutritious food. 13 percent of all food workers, nearly 2.8 million workers, relied on Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits (food stamps) to feed their households in 2016. This was 2.2 times the rate of all other industries.9

In the face of these injustices, unions and other worker-led organizations like the Food Chain Workers Alliance are at the forefront of expanding good food across the country. Through the Good Food Purchasing Program, public institutions can support these efforts and ensure that food procurement dollars support the health and wellbeing of food chain workers, from farm to fork.

The Center for Good Food Purchasing’s Good Food Purchasing Program provides a metric-based, flexible framework that encourages large institutions to direct their buying power toward five core values: (1) local economies, (2) environmental sustainability, (3) valued workforce, (4) animal welfare, and (5) nutrition. Through the Program, the Center works with institutions to establish supply chain transparency from farm to fork, evaluate how current purchasing practices align with the Good Food Purchasing Standards, set goals, measure progress, and celebrate successes in using institutional purchasing power to improve the food system.

We wish to thank the members of the Good Food for All collaborative for their contributions to materials from which this value spotlight was adapted. For more information about the Good Food Purchasing Program, visit goodfoodcities.org or contact us at info@goodfoodpurchasing.org

2 Ibid
5 Food Chain Workers Alliance and Solidarity Research Cooperative, “No Piece of the Pie,” op. cit.
6 Ibid
7 Ibid