COMMENTARY: Cultivating a Fair Food Economy in Los Angeles

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Who are the people who do the work to keep the food system going? Besides farmers and fisherfolk, food workers are all of the farmworkers and fisheries workers, workers in meat, poultry, and food processing, in warehouses and distribution centers, truck drivers, food retail workers, foodservice and restaurant workers, and street vendors. Food workers come from diverse backgrounds – they are American-born and foreign-born and represent all races and ethnicities.

The 21.5 million frontline workers in the U.S. food system make up the largest sector of employment in the country, and the growth of food jobs in the LA region reflects the national growth. Between 2003 and 2016, food worker employment increased by 19 percent while private industries expanded by only 10 percent.

Yet, even as the largest employer in the U.S., the food system also pays the lowest median hourly wage. The annual median wage for food chain workers is $16,000 and the hourly median wage is $10, well below the median wages across all industries of $36,468 and $17.53. The 2017 U.S. livable wage is $16.07 per hour, before taxes.

Significant racial and gender wage gaps also exist. For every dollar earned by white men working in the food chain, Latino men earn 76 cents, Black men 60 cents, Asian men 81 cents, and Native men 44 cents. White women earn less than half of their white male counterparts, at 47 cents to every dollar. Women of color face both a racial and a gender penalty: Black women earn 42 cents, Latina women 45 cents, Asian women 58 cents, and Native women 36 cents for every dollar earned by white men.

All of this results in food chain workers needing to rely on public assistance and suffering from higher rates of food insecurity than other workers. The gap between the percentage of food workers living in poverty and workers in other industries has been growing. Thirteen percent of all food workers, nearly 2.8 million workers, relied on Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits (food stamps) to feed their household in 2016. This was 2.2 times the rate of all other industries, a much higher rate than in 2010 when food workers had to use food stamps at 1.8 times the rate of all other industries.

Compared to the national trends, it’s heartening to see that family-supporting and the disparity in wages between non-supervisory and supervisory workers have moderately improved in the LA region. Wages have gone up because increases in the minimum wage at the state level and in the City and the County of Los Angeles and for some workers in Long Beach. These minimum wage increases were won due to strong grassroots organizing by food and other workers and policy advocacy by supporters and elected leaders.

Workers also suffer high rates of injuries and illness, and as has occurred in the LA region, the national rates of workplace injuries and illnesses have gotten worse. Nationally, this is despite the fact that since 2010 other private industries have seen overall improvement.

The minimum wage in all cities in the LA Region and in the state of California must go up to at least $15 per hour with a goal of increasing to a living wage for all. The right to organize should be guaranteed for
workers throughout the food system, including protection from retaliation. Collective bargaining leads to higher wages and benefits and a stronger voice on the job around issues such as health and safety. Policymakers should actively support on-the-ground organizing efforts as well as legislation to strengthen protections for workers’ right to freedom of association and collective bargaining.

More public institutions should adopt the Good Food Purchasing Program (GFPP), which moves these entities to buy more Good Food, which is defined as local, sustainable, fair, humane, and healthy. The GFPP moves our public dollars to support farms and food businesses that meet these values and encouraging those who don't yet meet the GFPP standards to move in that direction, creating more good jobs among other benefits.