

States, Congress and the Administration Must Adopt Robust Structural Reforms to Put Food Supply Chain Workers in the South on Solid Footing for the Future

The COVID-19 pandemic is shining a spotlight on the current lack of fundamental protections in place for food supply chain workers in the South, a failure that leaves too many workers unable to afford basic necessities. The truth is, food supply chain workers in the South have been in a slow-motion crisis for years. They are underpaid and undervalued for the importance of the jobs they do — jobs that often don't have basic benefits, such as paid sick days, family leave or health insurance. Southern state governments and the federal government have turned a blind eye to their dire predicament. Any actions we take now to shore up this workforce's access to benefits, such as expanding sick leave, should be made permanent and not end once this crisis is over. As soon as possible, we must adopt structural reforms to labor and employment laws that will provide this workforce with the stability and dignity these essential workers deserve.

Food Chain Workers in the South: Underpaid and Lacking in Basic Protections

- The South offers the weakest labor protections and lowest minimum wages in the country. Food workers, who often work at the lowest end of the wage scale in dirty, dangerous and demanding jobs, are particularly exposed in this region. In 2015, half of all workers earning the minimum wage or less — approximately 1.3 million people — lived in Southern states.¹ And, no state in the region mandates any form of paid leave or sick leave beyond the meager protections in federal law, such as the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA).
- Poultry is one of the South's largest employers. The nation's estimated 250,000 poultry processing workers are concentrated in the southeastern United States — for historical reasons but also because the region has such weak labor protections and low wages, which poultry companies seek out when expanding their business. Poultry work is extremely dangerous and has a physical, emotional and economic toll on low-income immigrants and communities of color. Many poultry workers are [injured on the job](#) and wind up with lifelong health issues and reliant on meager federal disability benefits.
- Many workers employed on the food supply chain in the South are immigrants. Many are here on temporary work visas, including H-2A agricultural workers and H-2B workers who work in food processing. Immigrant workers, including [guest workers](#) in the H-2A and H-2B programs, are more vulnerable to [wage theft](#), [discrimination](#), [human trafficking](#) and other forms of labor exploitation.

¹ See Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Share of Minimum Wage Earners*, https://public.tableau.com/views/ShareofMinimumWageWorkers/2015?:embed=y&:loadOrderID=0&:display_count=yes&:showTabs=y.

- Southern food workers are, for the most part, not unionized due to anti-union state laws that have ensured that the region's unionization rates remain the lowest in the nation. Low rates of unionization are directly linked to the decline in wages (for both union and nonunion workers) and the expanding wealth gap over the past few decades. Some Southern states in recent years have even tried to enact laws [that undermine the ability of farmworkers to form a union](#). This leaves many Southern food workers without the ability to organize for better working conditions, including necessary health and safety protections.
- In the past few years, food workers in the South have been under siege by ICE. In 2017, ICE raided a series of Chinese buffets in Mississippi, arresting dozens of restaurant workers. In 2018, more than 100 agents from the Department of Homeland Security and other federal and state agencies engaged in [a military-style](#) raid of a meatpacking plant in Tennessee, arresting more than 100 workers. In 2019, ICE agents raided [seven poultry plants in Mississippi](#) and arrested more than 600 workers. These raids have terrorized workers and torn apart families and communities.