

## SPLC Stands with Southern Workers in the Food Supply Chain Who are on the Front Lines of the COVID-19 Crisis

Throughout the South, hundreds of thousands of workers labor in the food supply chain — processing poultry, harvesting produce, shucking oysters, and packing and shipping the food that we consume. While many Americans shelter at home to weather the COVID-19 pandemic, Southern these workers are on the front lines of the crisis, ensuring the stability of our nation’s food supply during a time of global uncertainty. Mostly immigrants, they work in dangerous, low-paid industries in states that offer them virtually no state-level labor protections, organizing rights, health care, or safety-net benefits.

**Now, more than ever, we need to stand in solidarity with this workforce** to demand they receive critical and urgent protections needed to ensure they and their families can thrive. Their labor allows the rest of us to eat and feed our families in a time of crisis — and in normal times, too. **They are essential workers. And they deserve better!**

### **States, Congress and the Administration Must Act NOW to Support this Workforce**

#### *Immediate Actions to Protect Workers’ Health and Safety*

Food supply chain workers are working side by side on processing lines or in the fields. They can’t stay home, and social distancing on the job is currently difficult or impossible. They cannot wait another day for protections from COVID-19. They need life-saving information, personal protective equipment and robust whistleblower protections.

- The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) must require employers to provide accurate, up-to-date information about COVID-19, its transmission and how to prevent the spread. Such information must be provided in the worker’s primary language and must be explained both orally and in writing.
- OSHA must require employers to provide protective equipment, handwashing stations, hand sanitizer and clean water to workers; disinfect worksites regularly; and reformat workplaces and employer-provided housing to allow for medically recommended social distancing.
- OSHA must immediately send out guidance to employers reiterating that no worker can be retaliated against for demanding protective equipment; for seeking assistance from the government, worker centers or unions to obtain such equipment; or for refusing to work in an unsafe or unsanitary environment.
- Federal agencies must prohibit companies from implementing “no fault” attendance policies or attendance point systems that penalize workers for calling in sick — practices that are common in the poultry and meatpacking industries.

- Federal and state governments must ensure that all workers have access to free testing and treatment for COVID-19.

*Immediate Actions to Expand Benefits to Food Supply Chain Workers*

Most workers on the front lines of the food supply chain are underpaid and live paycheck to paycheck. Southern food supply chain workers simply cannot survive without support if laid off or forced to choose between work and childcare obligations. They must benefit from any government measure designed to support workers during the crisis.

- States and the federal government must provide immediate cash assistance to help all families make ends meet and protect the economy. Cash assistance should be targeted to those struggling the most and should not exclude immigrants, many of whom are making sure we have the food we need by processing, harvesting, cooking and delivering food for our meals.
- States must interpret unemployment insurance requirements liberally to ensure that the greatest number of people receive benefits (waiving any waiting periods for unemployment benefits) and allow workers who have been placed on unpaid “furloughs” due to COVID-19 to receive unemployment benefits.
- States and the federal government must provide paid leave for *all* working families, including sick leave for individuals who are being tested, sick, or are caring for a sick family member, and family leave for food supply chain workers who have childcare obligations related to COVID-19 school and daycare closures, in addition to any benefits an employer is already providing, such as health care coverage.
- States and the federal government must ensure that farmworkers and food processing workers who are required to work through the crisis will have access to affordable, high-quality childcare.
- States should include farmworkers and food processing workers in the definition of “essential workers” so they can receive any additional benefits afforded to that category of workers.
- The federal government should mandate hazard pay for essential workers required to work during the pandemic.

*Immediate Actions to Protect Immigrant Workers*

This virus does not discriminate, so neither should we. We must include immigrant workers and their families in our response to it. It is morally right thing to do. And, if we do not, we only allow the virus to spread among an already-vulnerable population, impeding our collective efforts to flatten the epidemiological curve of the pandemic. We cannot leave anyone out.

- States and the federal government must make all COVID-19-related benefits — cash assistance, testing and treatment for those who need it, paid leave, and any other benefits the government extends — available to *all* workers, regardless of immigration status.
- The U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) must issue an immediate moratorium on all immigration enforcement activities, especially and including worksite raids, I-9 audits and issuance of “No Match” letters by the Social Security Administration.
- DHS must automatically extend all guest worker visas set to expire in the next six months so that workers who are laid off but who cannot return to their country do not fall out of lawful status.

- The U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) must require employers to make efforts to transfer laid-off guest workers to another employer if acceptable to the workers or, if transfer is not possible, provide (or continue to provide) housing for guest workers who cannot return to their countries or pay for guest workers' return transportation home.
- For guest workers who have a contract with an employer, but who have not yet traveled to the United States, DOL must require employers to reimburse them for any visa and transportation fees they already paid out of pocket.