

Facts and Figures on Florida Farmworkers

(1) “A labor force in significant economic distress:” In January 2001, the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) sent a letter to members of the United States Congress reporting on the stark realities facing agricultural workers.¹ Entitled *The Agricultural Labor Market: Status and Recommendations*, the letter described farmworkers as **“a labor force in significant economic distress.”** The report cited farmworkers’ “low wages, sub-poverty annual earnings, (and) significant periods of un- and underemployment” to support its conclusions.



Other findings from the DOL letter include:

- *“Production of fruits and vegetables has increased and global demand for American produce continues to grow, but agricultural worker earnings and working conditions are either stagnant or in decline.”*
- *“Farm workers not only lost ground relative to other workers in the private sector; they lost ground absolutely.”*

According to the 2008 USDA Profile of Hired Farmworkers: “While farmworkers face workplace hazards similar to those found in other industrial settings, such as working with heavy machinery and hard physical labor, they also confront factors more common to agricultural production such as pesticide exposure, sun exposure, inadequate sanitary facilities, and crowded and/or substandard housing.”²

(2) Farmworkers earn poverty-level wages: According to the same 2008 USDA report, farmworkers remain “among the most economically disadvantaged working groups in the U.S.” and “poverty among farmworkers is more than double that of all wage and salary employees.”³

The National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS) provides a periodic account of hired farmworker salaries.⁴ The study sample includes wages of managers and supervisors, resulting in a definite upward skewing of the NAWS figures. Nevertheless, the figures still show farmworkers earning at or below poverty level:

	<i>Average Farmworker Salary, NAWS 2005</i>	<i>2007 Federal Poverty Guidelines, HHS</i>	<i>Living Wage for Immokalee, FL</i> ⁵
<i>Individual income</i>	\$10,000 – 12,499	\$10,210	\$18,486
<i>Household income</i>	\$15,000-17,499	\$20,650 (family of four)	\$44, 993 (family of four)

(3) No right to overtime or to organize: As a result of intentional exclusion from key New Deal labor reform measures, including the National Labor Relations Act and the Fair Labor Standards Act, **farmworkers do not have the right to overtime pay or the right to organize and collectively bargain**

1 U.S. Department of Labor. 2000. “The Agricultural Labor Market - Status and Recommendations.” Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Labor.

2 Kandel, W. “Profile of Hired Farmworkers, A 2008 Update.” USDA, ERS Economic Research Report No. 60, July, 2008. (38)

3 Ibid (7).

4 Metha, Kala, Susan M. Gabbard, and Vanessa Barrat, eds. 2005. *Findings from the National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS) 1997-1998*. Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Labor.

5 Living Wage Calculator. *Poverty in America Web Site*. Pennsylvania State University. <<http://www.livingwage.geog.psu.edu>>

with their employers. Due to the seasonal and unpredictable nature of agricultural work, therefore, farmworkers face periods of long hours with no overtime pay and yet, “on average, experience rates of unemployment double those of wage and salary workers.”⁶

(4) Thirty years of stagnant piece rates in the tomato harvest: Tomato pickers often toil 10-12 hour days in grueling conditions and earn no benefits whatsoever. Like textile workers at the turn of the last century, tomato harvesters are still paid *by the piece*.

The average piece rate today is 50 cents for every 32-lb bucket of tomatoes they pick, a rate that has remained **virtually stagnant for more than three decades**. At the current rate, a worker must pick more than 2.25 *tons* of tomatoes to earn minimum wage in a typical 10-hour workday—nearly twice the amount a worker had to pick to earn minimum wage thirty years ago.

To put this into perspective, if the 1980 piece rate of 40 cents per 32-lb bucket had simply **kept up with inflation, it would equal \$1.06/bucket in 2010**.⁷ Thus, in real terms, per bucket, tomato pickers today actually *earn about half of what they earned 30 years ago*.

(5) Modern-day slavery: In the most extreme conditions, farmworkers are held against their will and forced to work for little or no pay, facing conditions that meet the stringent legal standards for prosecution under modern-day slavery statutes. Federal Civil Rights officials have successfully prosecuted seven slavery operations involving over 1,000 workers in Florida’s fields since 1997, prompting one federal prosecutor to call Florida “ground zero for modern-day slavery.” In 2010, federal prosecutors indicted two more forced labor rings operating in Florida.

A Sample Workday for a Florida Tomato Picker

4:30 AM: Wake up. Prepare lunch in your trailer.

5:00 AM: Walk to the parking lot or pick-up site to begin looking for work.

6:30 AM: With luck, a contractor will choose you to work for him for the day. The job may be 10 miles to 100 miles away. Board the contractor’s converted school bus to go to the fields.

7:30 AM: Arrive at fields and begin weeding or simply waiting while the dew evaporates from the tomatoes. You are usually not paid for this time.

9:00 AM: Begin picking tomatoes – filling buckets, hoisting them on your shoulder, running them 100 feet or more to the truck and throwing the bucket up into the truck – all for a token worth, on average, 50 cents. Work fast because you must pick 2.5 tons of tomatoes in order to earn minimum wage today. This may or may not be possible depending on the time of year and quantity of tomatoes on the plants.

12:00 PM: Eat lunch as fast as you can, often with your hands soaked in pesticides. Return to work under the smoldering Florida sun.

5:00 PM (sometimes much later, depending on the season): Board bus to return to Immokalee.

Between 5:30 and 8:00 PM: Arrive in Immokalee and walk home.

⁶ For greater detail, see Section IV of Oxfam: *Like Machines in the Fields: Workers without Rights in American Agriculture*,” March 2004.
⁷ <http://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/cpicalc.pl>