

## Farm Worker Advocacy Part of Living Wage Campaign

United Methodist Women's Living Wage for All Campaign seeks to engage members as allies in passing state legislation that lays the base for a living wage for everyone. The living wage is what it takes for a family to meet basic needs of housing, food, transportation, utilities, etc., in their locale (nationally, \$16.07/hour of full-time work). The organizing by Farm Workers is part of that effort. Farm worker efforts for wage raises and control over their workplace are steps towards dignity and a living wage.

According to the National Farm Worker Ministry, "an estimated 2-3 million farm workers labor in the fields across the United States, including handpicking the vast majority of fruit and vegetable crops. **Farm workers are excluded from important national labor protections that other workers possess.** The role of farm workers is one of the most vital jobs, and yet it's also one of the most dangerous and least adequately compensated. For their demanding physical labor, farm workers earn, on average, between \$12,500 to \$14,999 a year for individuals and \$17,500 to \$19,999 for a family."<sup>i</sup> Practices in the fields in the United States have been poorly regulated and are ripe for abuse. This includes sexual violence against women farm workers, cheating on piecework tallies, lack of ability to take breaks, toxics in the fields, child labor, long hours without overtime pay, wage theft and more.

### Historic Exclusion

When the New Deal was passed in the 1930s, many workers were left out of key labor legislation. At the time, the majority of farm workers in the southeast were African American. The deal cut by legislators enabled employers to continue to pay these workers below minimum wage. **Sixty-five percent of African Americans were excluded from these programs at the time.**<sup>ii</sup> The Social Security Act of 1935 excluded agricultural workers and domestic workers from unemployment insurance and social security retirement benefits. The Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) of 1938 guarantees a minimum wage for each hour worked and requires overtime pay. Yet the "FLSA fully excluded farm workers until 1966, and to this day it continues to exclude them in significant ways: farm workers have no right to overtime pay, workers on small farms are not entitled to receive minimum wage, and children as young as twelve are legally allowed to work in the fields."<sup>iii</sup>

The National Labor Relations Act of 1935 forbids employers from firing a worker for joining a labor union and guarantees the right to collective bargaining, yet farm workers are excluded from this law.<sup>iv</sup> Today, while farmworkers, domestic workers and tipped workers, now mostly immigrants of color, must officially be paid the federal minimum wage, in practice this is often not the case. These workers, many of them women, continue to be the lowest paid and most exploited.

United Methodist Women's state-by-state living wage campaigns, therefore, will not apply to the most vulnerable groups — farm workers, domestic workers and tipped workers, because of such ongoing exclusions. In these cases, other approaches are needed to build the base for a living wage. Our accompaniment with them is part of United Methodist Women's commitment to the Charter for Racial Justice and our work for racial justice.



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## Building Workers' Power to Enforce Legislation

While legislation already affirms the right of farm workers to minimum wage, in practice the power of large corporate growers and retailers enables them to deny those wages. Efforts to earn a living wage are also

hampered by the seasonal nature of crops and growers' preference for piecework rates. This is why the faith community actively stands with farm workers to *build power to claim their rights*.

Because there are few legislative entry points, much of the current farm worker organizing focuses on seeking union contracts or food certification agreements with growers and retailers. Farm worker organizations have also targeted the big companies that are the primary purchasers of products, as a way to pressure growers to do the right thing.

United Methodist Women and its predecessors have supported the National Farm Worker Ministry (NFWM) since its founding almost 50 years ago and is an active member today. UMW and The United Methodist Church supported Cesar Chavez and the creation of the United Farmworkers Union in California by boycotting grapes and lettuce. Since that time, NFWM has supported all the major farm worker unions and associations across the United States. With other faith groups, United Methodist Women stands with those most affected and affirms their leadership.

The Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW)<sup>v</sup> is one of the farm worker associations supported by the National Farm Worker Ministry. United Methodist Women has actively partnered with CIW over several years and our members have joined CIW's corporate campaign efforts.<sup>vi</sup>

CIW workers have worked to get the five major fast food chains, which purchase most of the tomatoes that they use from Florida, to sign Fair Food Agreements. The agreements raise the income of the farm workers and guarantee the right to independent monitoring of conditions and compliance by the workers without fear of retaliation. Where such agreements exist, this has dramatically changed working conditions for farm workers, including reduction of violence against women in the fields. It also gives them *leverage to guarantee that they actually take home wage increases*.

Wendy's is the last of the five major fast food companies that has not signed a Fair Food Agreement. As part of the Mission u focus on "What About Our Money?" and United Methodist Women's Living Wage Campaign, we invite members to send postcards to the board chair and largest shareholder of Wendy's calling on Wendy's to sign a Fair Food Agreement. We join with National Farm Worker Ministry and with women leaders of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers to say, "Time's Up" on low wages, poor conditions and sexual violence.

Please join us.

- To learn about legislative efforts towards a Living Wage in your state, see: [unitedmethodistwomen.org/living-wage-map](http://unitedmethodistwomen.org/living-wage-map)
- For more information on how to get involved in the Living Wage campaign, contact: [livingwage@unitedmethodistwomen.org](mailto:livingwage@unitedmethodistwomen.org)

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<sup>i</sup> <http://nfwm.org/education-center/farm-worker-issues/>

<sup>ii</sup> The Ever-Growing Gap, the Racial Wealth Divide Initiative and Institute for Policy Studies, [https://www.ips-dc.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/The-Ever-Growing-Gap-CFED\\_IPS-Final-2.pdf](https://www.ips-dc.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/The-Ever-Growing-Gap-CFED_IPS-Final-2.pdf)

<sup>iii</sup> <http://nfwm.org/education-center/farm-worker-issues/labor-laws/>

<sup>iv</sup> *ibid*

<sup>v</sup> See <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/labor-laws-left-farm-workers-behind-vulnerable-abuse>; And <https://www.farmworkerjustice.org/sites/default/files/documents/7.2.a.7%20weeding-out-abuses.pdf>

<sup>vi</sup> See <https://www.flickr.com/photos/umwomen/albums/72157651829403695>; <https://www.unitedmethodistwomen.org/news/victory-for-farmworkers-rights>; <https://www.unitedmethodistwomen.org/news/farmworkers-for-fair-wages>