

Migrant Workers' Rights and COVID-19

By Ken Homan, S.J.

A return to normality greatly tempts many of us. Yet what is comfortable for some is traumatic and unjust for others. COVID-19 has brought many workers and the injustices they face front and center.

During COVID-19, there has been a great deal of talk regarding essential workers. In many ways, the virus has reminded us of those workers we frequently forget or outright ignore. These might include maintenance and cleaning staff, grocery store clerks, EMTs, and more. Unfortunately, these essential workers are often the lowest paid, worst treated of workers. At their fore are farmworkers, the vast majority of them migrants and many of them undocumented.

COVID-19 has compounded preexisting injustices, especially those faced by farmworkers. For example, one of the keys to avoiding COVID-19 is through proper sanitation. Farm owners are required to provide restrooms at the edge of fields. However, these restrooms often lack hand washing supplies, toilet paper, or feminine hygiene products. Moreover, farmworkers are typically paid by piece rate, meaning they are paid by total weight or number of items picked. Every time a worker takes a restroom or hygiene break, they risk losing hard-earned payment. Farmworkers are also exposed to pesticides, chemicals, and extreme stress under heat, all of which can weaken the body's immune system.

Several injustices stem from the severe lack of worker pay, remuneration, and protections. Many farmworkers earn just \$18,000 per year, despite working long and incredibly laborious hours. Farmworkers are also categorized differently than many standard workers. In 1938, Congress passed the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA), but refused to include farmworkers due to the fact that at the time many farmworkers were Black. The FLSA guaranteed a minimum wage, sick pay, etc. In 1966, farmworkers won a right to a minimum wage, but not other protections such as overtime, sick pay, or union protections. Many workers see the exact same food they pick in the grocery store but are unable to afford it.

On top of these challenges in the workplace, farmworkers often face dangerous conditions at home. Farmworkers typically live in small apartments, or in grower-sponsored barracks. In order to afford rent, it is common for eight to ten people to live in four-person apartments. Workers even sometimes rotate shifts so that one person can use a bed while the other works, then swap. Grower-sponsored housing is often barracks-style, meaning workers are in incredibly close quarters with many people sharing bathrooms. In both of these cases, there is little to no social distancing.

Farmworkers face tremendous injustices. There is little oversight for worker safety. Fear of deportation or loss of job makes them less likely to speak up for their own safety. Children as young as twelve can still work in the fields. Workers fear harassment or revenge if they speak out or organize. Agricultural giants depend on these inequalities. These injustices have only been compounded by COVID-19.

REFLECTION

We have seen that COVID-19 has overwhelmingly impacted communities of color and those experiencing poverty. Access to quality healthcare varies tremendously along income and racial lines, only made worse by COVID-19. Frankly, we do not yet know how these disparities will truly impact migrant workers. For workers who follow migrant farmworker streams, they cannot afford to shelter-in-place. What will be the impact on farmworker health for those who follow planting seasons?



A return to normality greatly tempts many of us. Yet what is normally comfortable for some is traumatic and unjust for others. COVID-19 has brought many workers and the injustices they face front and center. Curing the virus not only means the actual illness, but also addressing the underlying injustices that exacerbate it. Most importantly, it includes listening to those most impacted—frontline and essential workers. A return to normal again pushes these workers to the margins. Rather, we are called to decenter ourselves.

There are several steps we can take to do just that:

- Learn who plants, tends to, and picks America's food. Learn about the conditions these farmworkers face.
- Determine how these conditions came to exist. Who is involved? How are wages determined? What are the laws?
- Reflect on what our faith says about these injustices. What does Scripture say about workers? What does Catholic Social Teaching say about farmworkers and justice?
- Take concrete action as a community. What can your school do to address food justice? What about your parish? How can you get others involved?

While COVID-19 might one day be cured, the repercussions will continue to be with us unless we act. A return to normality continues putting at risk workers in a myriad of fields and circumstances. Our faith demands that we listen to those workers and determine how we can best serve them and challenge systems of injustice.

Reflection Questions

1. What stories have you heard in the news and on social media about workers during the pandemic? How has your awareness of essential workers changed or grown during this crisis?
2. In what ways have you benefited from essential workers during this time? For example, consider areas such as food, mail, and sanitation. Are you or any of your family members considered essential workers? If so, what services have you provided for the community?
3. What systemic changes would you like to see happen for essential workers, specifically farmworkers, in light of the pandemic?

REFLECTION

Faith in Action

- Implement one of the suggestions mentioned in the article to promote farmworker justice in your own community.
- The United Farmworkers, an important group in the history of labor movements, invites you to send a letter to U.S. Congress asking them to consider farm workers in future COVID-19 relief packages. Read and sign the letter at: bit.ly/2Wy0Nf2

Prayer

We pray in thanksgiving for all workers, and in a special way for agricultural and farmworkers who provide essential services as they harvest the food that travels to our supermarkets and our plates.

Keep them safe from harm during the COVID-19 pandemic. May we use our voices to speak prophetically to those in power and ensure that the needs and fundamental human rights of all workers, especially farmworkers, are met as we move through and beyond this crisis. Amen