The Hands that Feed Us
Hungry Workers in the U.S. Food Supply Chain

It is a bitter irony that low wages for our nation’s food workers mean that many are unable to afford food for themselves or their families. But food insecurity is only one of many challenges facing food workers, as ICCR members learned at a recent educational session highlighting labor issues in the U.S. food supply chain.

According to a report by the Food Chain Workers Alliance, U.S. food production—excluding processing, distribution, retail, and service—collectively account for over $1.8 trillion dollars annually or 13% of total GDP. Moreover, the food system is the nation’s largest employer, accounting for roughly 20 million U.S. workers or one-sixth of the nation’s workforce. Despite the importance of the sector to the American economy, food workers are among the lowest paid, and overworked employees often work in unsafe environments and without access to health care.

On hand in February to present new research on the topic were ICCR members Ariel Jacobsen of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee and Bill Dempsey of the Nathan Cummings Foundation, as well as Diana Robinson with the Food Chain Worker’s Alliance (FCWA) and Saru Jayaraman from the Restaurant Opportunities Center (ROC).

Robinson introduced the new FCWA report *The Hands that Feed Us*. Based on statistics from the U.S. Department of Labor and the Bureau of Labor Statistics as well as interviews with over 600 food chain workers and nearly 50 food employers across the U.S., the report describes the poor wages and working conditions faced by food workers, and identifies strategies that policymakers, consumers and employers can use to address them.

ROC is an advocacy group which was founded to support restaurant workers displaced by 9/11. Jayaraman spoke to us of ROC’s work with high profile restaurants to improve working conditions. She also introduced her book *Behind the Kitchen Door*, which describes how “poor working conditions, discriminatory labor practices, exploitation, and unsanitary kitchens affect the meals that arrive at our restaurant tables.”

ICCR members worked together with the speakers to identify key levers within the food supply chain to improve the lives of workers; to develop questions that investors can use to engage companies in different segments of the supply chain; and to map initiatives and networks to identify potential areas of collaboration.