

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. 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 conclusion, adding that **“agricultural worker earnings and working conditions are either stagnant or in decline.”**

Other findings from the DOL letter include:ⁱ

- ⇒ **“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.”**
- ⇒ **“(E)xclusions from legal protections have a negative impact on farm workers and contribute to the factors that discourage farm workers from staying in the industry or others from seeking work in agriculture.”**

2) Farmworkers earn poverty level wages: The **National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS)** provides a periodic account of hired farmworker salaries and poverty level.ⁱⁱ The study sample includes wages of managers and supervisors, who according to the USDA represent 21 percent of all hired farmworkers. This results in a very definite skewing upward of the NAWS figures. Harvester-specific annual income figures would be significantly lower. Nevertheless, the NAWS figures still show farmworkers earning at or below poverty level:

	Average Farm Worker Salary, NAWS 2005	2006 Federal Poverty Guidelines, HHS	Living Wage for Immokalee, FL ⁱⁱⁱ
Individual income	\$10,000 – 12,499	\$10,210	\$18,486
Household income	\$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 with their employers.**^{iv}

4) Thirty years of stagnant piece rates in the tomato harvest: Tomato pickers often work 10-12 hour days in grueling and dangerous conditions without any benefits whatsoever. Florida tomato pickers earn an average of 45 cents per 32-lb bucket of tomatoes, a rate that has not risen significantly since 1978. As a result, workers have to pick over twice the number of buckets per hour today to earn minimum wage as they did in 1980. At today’s piece rate, workers have to pick nearly **2 ½ tons** of tomatoes just to earn minimum wage.

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 legal standards for prosecution under modern-day slavery statutes. Federal Civil Rights officials have prosecuted

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five slavery operations involving over 1,000 workers in Florida's fields since 1997. On federal prosecutor called Florida "ground zero for modern-day slavery."

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 old bus to go to the fields.

7:30 AM: Arrive at fields and begin weeding or 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 40-50 cents. Work fast because you must pick 2 TONS of tomatoes in order to earn \$50 today. This may or may not be possible depending on the time of year and quantity of tomatoes on the plants.

12:00: Eat lunch as fast as you can, often with your hands soaked in pesticides. Return to working 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.

ⁱ U.S. Department of Labor. 2000. "The Agricultural Labor Market – Status and Recommendations." Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Labor.

ⁱⁱ 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.

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

^{iv} For greater detail, see Section IV of Oxfam's Report: *Like Machines in the Fields: Workers without Rights in American Agriculture*, March 2004.