

FOOD POLICY COUNCILS AND FOOD CHAIN LABOR:

SETTING THE TABLE FOR LABOR JUSTICE

This report was written by Laura-Anne Minkoff-Zern, Jonnell Robinson, and Frank Sarfo with input from Karen Bassarab and Anne Palmer. Minkoff-Zern and Robinson are associate professors of Geography and the Environment at Syracuse University. Sarfo is a graduate student in the Sociology Department at Syracuse University. Bassarab and Palmer are with the Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future.

This project was generously funded by the Lender Center for Social Justice at Syracuse University.

Introduction

Food policy councils (FPCs), networks that represent various stakeholders and address food-related issues and needs within a city, county, state, region, or Tribal area, take part in grassroots work to create policy reforms related to food access and food system inequalities. These networks take action through advocacy efforts, grassroots initiatives, and coalition building at regional, state, and national levels, and incorporate key voices across agri-food movements. They incorporate voices from across the food system with the shared goal of creating more equitable and ecologically sustainable food systems. They do this through legislative advocacy, initiating and supporting regional initiatives, collaborative campaigns, and coalition building at the local, state, and federal levels (Burgan et al. 2022; Erwin 2016; Scherb et al. 2012).

This report summarizes research on the experiences of FPCs nationwide as they work to confront labor injustices through their policy work and grassroots advocacy efforts. Using mixed methods, including interviews, focus groups, and surveys of FPC representatives and collaborators, our research explores how FPCs take up organizational tensions between labor advocates and small food and farming business interests, challenges, and opportunities they experience working on labor and wage disparities through policy and advocacy, and how these approaches can be improved and expanded. We ask, How are food policy councils addressing disparities in wages, promotions, and business ownership in their food system work, if at all? What are FPCs' key challenges and opportunities for incorporating food labor organizers in their policy work, agendas, and actions? What are best practices for food policy councils to incorporate labor disparities into their

action plans, and how do they best advocate for structural changes to food workers' wages and opportunities for class mobility?

Food systems include the complex web of institutions, resources, and processes that bring food from the farm to the table and into the waste stream. Food systems workers, in particular frontline food systems workers, are those that perform the labor to keep us all fed—from the farm to the waste stream (Lo and Jacobson 2011; Mares and Minkoff-Zern 2024). Food labor organizers and activists, many of whom collaborate through the umbrella organization, Food Chain Workers Alliance (FCWA), advocate for better working conditions and a stronger voice for frontline food workers. Scholars and researchers have followed this movement, and argued that a truly sustainable food system must center just labor practices and standards, including living wages; the protected right to collectively bargain; health care, sick leave, and other benefits; and proper health, safety, and work conditions, among other workers' rights and protections (Hunt 2016; Lo 2014; Levkoe et al. 2016; Lo and Jacobson 2011; Lo and Delwiche 2016; Allen 2008; Minkoff-Zern 2017; Mares and Minkoff-Zern 2024). Our focus here on frontline food systems labor emphasizes the most vulnerable workers, who are employed in growing, packing, processing, transporting, stocking, selling, cooking, serving, and cleaning up our food (see Figure 1). Many jobs in the food system have been devalued, gendered, and racialized over time, as these workplaces have become increasingly occupied by economically vulnerable and marginalized people (Rodman et al. 2016; Stuesse 2016; McClure et al. 2020; Alkon and Guthman; Sbicca 2018). For example, people of color make up 50% of essential workers in food and agricultural sectors. These racial dynamics

intersect with class signifiers, as 86% of these front-line food and agricultural workers also do not have a college degree. Further, essential food workers make the lowest median hourly wage of all essential workers, and only 8% are unionized (McNicholas and Poydock 2020).

Many of these frontline workers regularly struggle with low wages, health and safety violations and abuses, irregular and unpredictable schedules, lack of access to healthcare, paid sick leave, and other benefits, and experience a disproportionate amount of sexual harassment and related violence on the job. While frontline food workers' job titles, responsibilities, and employers vary substantially, the majority of food systems workers experience employment vulnerabilities related to earning poverty wages with promotion or class mobility largely inaccessible to them (See Table 1).

For this study, we partnered with the Food Policy Networks project (FPN) at the John Hopkins Center for a Livable Future to collect initial survey data. The FPN project works directly with FPCs, national organizations, and other groups to support the development of state and local food policy through networking, capacity building, research, and technical assistance. To better inform their efforts, the FPN project conducts an annual survey of their network. They send the survey to approximately 350 food policy councils each year and receive responses from about two-thirds of survey recipients. We analyzed surveys from 2016 to 2020 and worked with the FPN project to incorporate additional labor related questions into their 2023 survey. Table 2 provides a summary of responses to questions related to labor from 2016–2023. We summarize which survey participants identified labor as a top-three priority and which had labor groups represented in their membership.¹ FPCs

1. The survey defined “food labor” as “minimum wage standards, sick leave, working conditions.” The labor sector was defined as “workers or worker representatives (e.g. farm workers, waiters, labor unions).”

that indicated they identified labor as a top-three priority and had labor membership were further investigated through supplemental content analysis of publicly available, online websites and reports of the FPCs that identified labor as a priority in the FPN project annual survey. We conducted a thorough examination of the annual reports, policy briefs, success stories, and websites, and identified FPCs that represented examples of engagement with food labor as both a stated priority and evidence of action.

We then chose a selection of FPCs to reach out to for in depth interviews and focus groups. In selecting examples, we sought representation from FPCs across a range of geographic regions, grassroots versus government affiliated groups,

and urban versus rural representation (see Table 3). We invited FPC representatives to take part in interviews and focus groups, in person and virtually as worked for the participants. We ultimately conducted 11 individual interviews and six focus groups with leaders from ten different councils as well as three interviews with representatives from three different nonprofit advocacy groups who work with food system laborers. Additionally, we conducted two panel discussions at conferences which included FPC representatives from our study.

Below we present some of the more salient findings from our interviews and focus group discussions with FPC representatives and labor advocacy groups.

Barriers to Taking up Labor as a Priority Issue

The most significant challenge faced by FPCs in adopting a pro-labor agenda is the inherent tension that exists between labor advocacy and pro-business stakeholders. When FPC leadership and other members express interest in addressing food system labor injustices, the tension can create struggles among different actors in the group. We found that many FPCs struggle to have labor and business at the same (literal and figurative) table, which we were told can undermine broader food systems goals. In several examples, tensions specifically between agricultural labor advocates and activists and farm owner-operators threatened to or actually created rifts that councils could not recover from. This follows a long history of labor interests being marginalized in US agricultural policy as well as food systems discussions (Morrill, Santo, and Bassarab, 2018).

Labor is often viewed as a contentious issue and some of our interviewees expressed concerns that

if or when labor is prioritized, there is a risk that other important policy priorities for which there is more consensus among stakeholders may be jeopardized. As a result, building consensus among stakeholders around a shared policy platform oriented toward labor injustices in the food system can remain elusive because of diverging perspectives and priorities. Beyond building consensus, FPC leaders expressed concerns about alienating their membership, particularly farmers and local business owners. For many, forcing discussions about labor creates a dynamic in which only those FPC members who are committed to addressing food system labor injustices through an equity lens are willing to stay at the table. This is particularly salient with representatives from large scale agriculture whose priorities are in direct conflict with worker advocates, as laws regulating farmworker wages and schedules have been debated in state legislatures over the past several years. One council member, whose council

has been confronted with the tension between these groups at the state level, explained,

The forum has identified for itself more work than it can realistically take on. And I think that's part of why labor is not at the top of the list, because there's, I don't want to say lower hanging fruit, because everything the forum is working on is complicated. But there are other pieces of work related to the food system that the forum has identified, they want to put their energy towards. And so folks recognize that labor as an issue would likely be contentious and difficult to get consensus around. And there's things we can work on today where we can get consensus. So I think maybe as the forum, if they run out of things, or as we've achieved more things together, I could see labor issues bubbling up depending on who is part of the forum at any given time, and then we'll have to figure out how we react to that.

For most councils, labor is simply not a priority. As demonstrated in Table 2, only about 1% of FPCs identified labor as a top-three priority 2017-2023 with the exception of 2020 when several FPCs focused their efforts on advocating for frontline food workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Council leaders shared a variety of reasons for deprioritizing labor. Some told us they have a hard time making choices about which issues and goals to prioritize. In particular, we heard that addressing a contentious issue such as labor requires trust among constituents and trust takes time to build. It also requires a sort of consensus that is not always possible. When other issues gain consensus with less struggle and debate, they are able to take action more immediately, so those issues are prioritized over debating their stance or policy recommendations on labor related

issues. Other councils say they see labor as out of the scope of local food systems work or simply too big of an issue to narrow down priorities for engagement. They attribute this to the complexity and diverse scales of labor regulations within the food system—for example, given the vast diversity of sectors (e.g., production, processing, food service), employers may have different labor standards and issues to address. A food policy council professional told us,

I think there's a myriad of reasons [that] labor doesn't always start at the table when councils form. And so that conversation isn't there from the beginning, but there's also this complex web of policies related to labor. And so where, from a local council perspective, do you engage in what is your role in helping labor from this local-state perspective, because most councils, when they're talking about working on policy, are working at the local level or at the state level. But often they're starting locally, and they may scale up to state, but a lot of labor issues deal with federal standards, federal safety standards. So they're not quite there and engaging with them and connecting. So I think that complex web around labor is challenging to tease out.

Less established FPCs shared that it was difficult to take on labor as a key issue when getting started as leaders worked to build their base of supporters and stakeholders. They stated that this relationship building required intentionality and careful conversations around issues that may raise tensions, which newer FPCs said they were not ready to take on. Even when labor was a priority among leaders, they told us it takes time to build relationships and trust with food system stakeholders. It also takes time to understand the landscape, identify partners and

priorities, build coalitions and begin to influence policy and practice. They felt it was important to establish their base as an FPC before wading into conflictual issues like food labor. As newer FPCs were navigating how to form food-based alliances, initial work focused on issues where there was common ground and opportunity to build the network, trust, and momentum. It was harder to get workers and their representatives to the table and starting with a contentious issue was seen as counterproductive to establishing the FPC.

Additionally, FPC leaders spoke of limited capacity, including time and financial resources. Most FPCs have a small staff, and if they are not government affiliated, they are grant funded. Staff is usually part time or volunteer and their time is limited. Leadership and expertise are needed to take on labor issues and they felt they already had too many priority issues on the table. Further, nonprofit organizations are typically at the mercy of funding agencies and funders' priorities may not align with a labor-focused agenda. The types of funding available to FPCs may also prevent nonprofits from doing direct advocacy work. In contrast, FPCs housed in local or regional

government offices had more established staff and funding, but are also sometimes limited in doing work that is seen as "political." The director of a city-wise council explained,

During the pandemic, we faced a period of financial hardship as many funders prioritized direct services, such as food distribution, over the type of work we do. Our focus is on coalition building and organizing, particularly around food labor policy, which unfortunately received less attention and funding during that time.

It is worth noting that the placement of the FPC within or outside of government affects their ability to engage with certain issues. FPCs embedded in public agencies may be uniquely positioned to affect positive change such as Good Food Purchasing legislation and government procurement such as in Philadelphia where they are situated in the mayor's office. On the other hand, it can be politically challenging to partner with labor organizations based on the political leanings of elected officials.

Challenges to Sustaining a Pro-Labor FPC Agenda

Among those councils that have been successful in engaging with labor advocates, many struggle to sustain labor representation. Specifically, interviewees told us that it is difficult to keep labor advocates active in the council if they don't see a tangible policy platform that directly benefits workers. FPC leaders who have been successful in incorporating labor representatives into their priority setting explained that workers and worker advocates feel unheard when they are present, emphasizing that this relates to the positionality of leaders in an FPC, who are less likely to be

from a working class background or to be food workers themselves. A co-director of a county-based council, who is also a farmworker labor organizer told us,

It's been really hard to get food systems workers to participate, because they don't. Several things happen - there hasn't been the education for workers to see the value that a food systems plan is actually going to raise their wages and job security. It's a little bit more. It's not like labor organizing,

like a union organizing campaign. It's an institutional change and I think a lot of workers fail to see that connection. And when they see the connection, they don't have the time, a lot of food systems workers are low-income workers, they're not earning the wages, and they're working weird shifts, they're tired, it's really hard to get them to participate in some of these. You know, these can be very boring meetings that most of the time don't touch on anything that really intersects with their lives.

Interviewees told us this struggle to maintain labor engagement is oftentimes due to a lack of trust between stakeholders, as there may not be established cultural norms for consensus building among stakeholders with diverging agendas and opinions which allow for productive conflictual conversations. Even more established FPCs, who have spent many years working to develop cultural norms on how to address diverse perspectives, see labor as an explosive topic—with potential to sever trust and stop them from getting other tasks and goals accomplished. Relatedly, council leaders explained that labor issues are seen as values based, and not specifically policy driven, and that council members need more education to

come to consensus with such a hot button topic. As one council leader explained,

The issues that those groups [labor advocates] are raising are not ones that the forum itself is particularly well positioned to make recommendations or respond to. And so it becomes more of a values based conversation and less about specific recommendations and policies. And so that is one challenge. I think the other one is that the issues are so incredibly complex. And our forum has people from such different backgrounds, and extra areas of expertise, that we have always spent a lot of time and there's a commitment to like mutual learning, and shared learning. And so where there's a really complex issue, it can sometimes take years before the forum gets to a place where they feel like they might be able to make a recommendation. And I think the issues and that is when it's something that they can make a recommendation that's actionable at the state or local level. So I think the pathway to that sort of action; it has not been particularly clear.

Opportunities for FPCs to Advance a Pro-Labor Agenda

FPCs that have been successful in creating pro-labor alliances and coalitions and advocating for labor centered policy positions, report that their efforts to focus on building trust, capacity, and coalitions, and centering labor from the outset contributed to their success.

Interviewees suggest that to bring diverse voices to the table (and keep them there), FPCs need to develop a broader council vision that benefits

all parties, so when there is a conflict around a specific issue, stakeholders will see value in maintaining their council connection. This may start with creating a common definition of the food system, including council priorities and plans to move forward. For labor to be a priority, this also means defining a shared vision for a just and sustainable food system, with labor interests as essential to the mission and agenda. Specially, from a labor advocate perspective, these must be

seen as core values, not as a specialty issue. To help create a shared vision and definitions, some councils have hosted education and information sessions so actors from different food sectors and positions can learn from each other, with leaders seeing FPCs as having potential to provide those connections.

For example, the Whatcom County Food System Committee in Whatcom County, Washington, worked with owners and workers on a comprehensive food systems plan for their county. While it was not without conflict, building a broader food systems vision created a process for listening to conflicting interests and finding common ground on how to support a thriving local food economy.

In another example, both the [Chicago Food Policy Action Council](#) and Los Angeles FPC have worked with the [Good Food Purchasing Program](#) (GFPP) as a way to bridge labor and local business priorities. This includes a focus on “higher road employers,” who offer fair wages and benefits to their employees. Council leaders emphasize that employers with better labor practices struggle less with worker turnover, which arguably leads to more committed and engaged employees (For more information, see: [Procuring Food Justice: Grassroots Solutions for Reclaiming Our Public Supply Chains](#), 2023). Similarly, the Philadelphia Food Policy Advisory Council has also developed their own good food purchasing priorities for all businesses that contract with the city government ([Guide to Fair Labor for Good Food Businesses: Free and Low-Cost Trainings & Resources for Attracting and Retaining Talented Employees](#), 2019).

A campaign director for a national food justice alliance spoke about how the purchasing programs work,

And so that's where GFPP comes in. It's essentially an incentives mechanism for the companies that want to sell food to public institutions. That's the simple filter. I see it as a filter, it just filters out all of the really bad companies and leaves the ones that are not as bad and so it really depends on how tight your filter is. Some of them have bigger holes in them and you can be a company that provides services to the city of Chicago and still be exploiting labor and still be doing horrible things to the earth. But you're the only shot, you're the only game in town. Right? So you're the one that's going to get the contract anyway. So I think that's the incentive and the enforcement of things.

A member of the [Philadelphia Food Policy Advisory Council](#), which is located in the office of the mayor, explained the process in Philadelphia, where they have an independent good food business guide:

So we literally just started brainstorming, then we had a situation where some of the bigger restaurants were not treating their workers fairly and stealing their wages. So then they heard we were doing what we were doing and then jumped into the work group. And that's literally how the good food business guide came about. It was the workers, the directly impacted servers and wait and worker staff, the growers and gardeners who wanted to produce for the restaurants and the restaurant owners, mainly Black and Hispanic restaurant owners.

To keep businesses like farmers and restaurant owners engaged, interviewees shared that it is important to create something that they see as “value added” for their enterprise. Another council

member spoke to us about how to keep these interests at the table:

See, they think if you keep going like that, with that fear that we don't have labor at the table, because we're afraid these other stakeholders aren't going to show up. Well, you know, that's their decision. You've got to have labor at the table, and you have to build a strong network with labor up and down the food chain and keep moving forward with the stakeholders willing to dialogue with worker representatives. Reserve the seat for the other stakeholders, welcome them when they join, we need them to be part of the table. And then when they join us, it's a different conversation. Which is why we want to have discussions with the farmers and the growers. We want to talk to them with an equitable level, not as subservient or with fear, because we're building a system that is actually going to benefit them. And I think some of the farmers coming now into the Whatcom Food Systems Committee, or listening to it or participating see that it is going to be helpful to them.

Listening to stakeholder needs is crucial for both owners and workers, especially when things get tense or conflictual. For farmers for example, one council explained that policy aside, farm owners expressed that they care about their public image and take offense to being vilified, as compared with farmworkers, who cared most about concrete policies. A member of the [Whatcom County Food System Committee](#), which is housed within the Whatcom County Health and Community Services government offices, said this of working with local farmers on their county wide food systems plan:

And I remember the coordinator coming and saying, one, the struggle was to even get the farmers to come to the table. They didn't want to talk when they thought labor would be at the table. And so we had to strategize on why it was important for them to share and the work we were doing countywide to have the food system acknowledged and to start protecting. I had to do some of that. Let's find the commonalities as to why they want to engage in this project, and that we're not going to twist their words or try and cut their rights, but more we just want them to have their words and their perspective in the assessment.

To more effectively maintain connections with food system workers and representatives, FPC leaders must do what is needed to keep them present, by finding out what they practically require to attend and engage in meetings. This may include being proactive in making meetings accessible in terms of timing of day, language and translation, childcare and other needs such as honorariums or stipends. These accommodations allow workers who might otherwise experience barriers to participation to devote their time and energy to these important conversations. A chair of the leadership team at another statewide council explained,

I feel like where we've had success is when we have offered respectful stipends and honorariums for people's time and then to really make a concerted effort to make sure the door is open. And I think one of our most successful events, at least in the Rogue Valley was when we got the headsets for translation, which were awesome. And that was one of the best conversations that's ever happened about farmworker safety and farmworker related issues here. And so I think that there are some barriers,

clearly around, like, what time of day those meetings are held, if there's child care, if there's a stipend... And I think that that is a really important value that we're not asking people to take or lose money to give their opinion, or participate in something where their voice should already be at the forefront and honored. And so just adding those little pieces there of I think, from my vantage point, maybe what's been supportive to folks feeling more included, and having that sense of support.

Building trust with groups that don't historically feel that they have been listened to by people in positions of power may mean letting things look different, especially meeting timing and structure. FPCs have been most successful by partnering with existing worker-led organizations, such as unions and worker centers, and making connections with workers on the ground to carry out such a vision. This approach has been shown to work best where there is already a strong labor organizing presence. A member of a different council also shared her thoughts on the importance of getting people with opposing views and positions of power to connect in the same space:

You've got to have the people that are impacted at the table. Otherwise, you're making something based on your perception of what you think they need. So I always think solutions are better if you have those that have lived experience in it speaking, right and understanding it's just a person, it's one person's perspective. But so I would always advocate for us to have that in policymaking... But we weren't running a transformational group, like there might have been relationships formed. But developmentally, those groups are on such different parts of the continuum,

that the reality that one person's hearing may be a farmworker's story is going to be viewed through their cultural competency lens. So if they already think it's us versus them, it's going to be really hard to switch that. Just through knowing another person though. I love believing that at least that starts building a humaneness. I think it could go a multitude of ways. And that would just be one of the outcomes; somebody built a relationship and felt like they knew someone.

Finding common ground and shared interests between workers and businesses and making everyone feel that their priorities are heard is essential to making progress on labor issues. Examples that have been put into practice by FPCs include advocating for grants and loans for workers to enter small business ownership and workforce development pipelines, as well as more visionary ideas such as implementing comprehensive rent control and regulating global finance investments, as well as engaging with state and county level policies which regulate corporate food. These types of programs and policies can benefit small business and workers alike, and help people make connections between stakeholder groups. While these may not be seen directly as pro-labor, they are related to broader worker opportunities and a way to identify common goals for bringing in diverse stakeholders. Such examples benefit local economies and communities, with an ability to make a tangible impact at the local scale.

Recommendations for Implementing a Pro-Labor Food Policy Agenda

1. Connect with worker groups in your region who have established trust and traction with food system workers on the ground.
2. Include labor representation in food system planning efforts; fair labor practices must be enshrined as a policy priority.
3. Find common ground issues which will rally workers and (locally-based) owners; these may relate to addressing economic inequalities and relieving poverty more broadly.
4. Invest time and effort in conflict resolution and coalition building strategies instead of avoiding tough conversations.
5. Initiate accommodations to improve the likelihood of workers being able to participate in meetings and policy setting.
6. Enact Good Food Purchasing policies.

Future Research Needs

FPCs need a better understanding of who the food systems workers are in their region and what needs and concerns they have in order to better engage them in their work. FPCs would also benefit from a broader definition of food systems labor. The work of many FPCs prioritizes the struggles of farm workers, while food labor

covers a range of workers, from grocery store workers to meat processing, who have different priorities and concerns. This narrow focus precludes opportunities to achieve food system labor reform through a broader focus on the full spectrum of food system labor injustices.

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Table 1: Employment data for Food Chain Workers derived from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics and the U.S. Census Bureau’s Occupational Employment and Wage Survey and the Current Population Survey

Sector	Employment	Hourly Mean Wage	Annual Mean Wage
Production	711,660	\$19.34	\$40,225.91
Processing	879,490	\$18.59	\$38,666.67
Distribution	3,608,930	\$20.32	\$42,271.33
Retail	1,673,620	\$15.66	\$32,573.33
Service	9,655,990	\$16.24	\$33,772.50
Waste	473,479	\$22.05	\$45,862.11

Source: Minkoff-Zern and Mares 2025

Table 2: FPCs that stated “food labor” was one of their top priorities or that the “labor sector” was represented in their membership in the annual survey of FPCs conducted by the Food Policy Networks

Survey Year	Number of FPC Survey Respondents	FPCs that stated “food labor” is one of their “top three priorities”*	FPCs that stated the “labor sector” is represented in their membership**
2016	316	4 (1.3%)	X
2017-2018	308	6 (1.9%)	155 (50.3%)
2019	241	3 (1.2%)	141 (58.5%)
2020	198	12 (6.1%)	66 (33.3%)
2023	231	3 (1.3%)	61 (26.4%)

*From 2016 until 2020, the survey defined food labor as “Food labor (e.g., minimum wage standards, sick leave, working conditions)”. The 2023 survey defined food labor as “Food labor (e.g., minimum wage standards, sick leave, working conditions, and worker training)”.

**Labor sector representation was defined as “Farm/food industry workers” in the 2017-2018 and 2019 surveys. In the 2020 and 2023 survey, the labor sector was defined as “Workers or worker representatives (e.g. farm workers, waiters, labor unions)”.

Table 3: FPCs and organizations included in the study*

FPC or Organization Name	Number of Interviews Conducted	Number of Focus Group Discussions Conducted
Chicago Food Policy Action Council	1	
Los Angeles Food Policy Council **	2	
Oregon Community Food Systems Network	1	1
Philadelphia Food Policy Advisory Council		1
Syracuse Onondaga Food System Alliance		1
The Colorado Food Systems Coalition	1	
Washington State Food Policy Forum		1
Western Michigan Food Recovery Council	1	
Whatcom County Food System Committee	4	1
Whatcom Food Network	3	
Center for Good Food Purchasing		1
HEAL Food Alliance **	1	

*Some interview participants also participated in focus group discussions.

** Some participants previously worked with the [Food Chain Workers Alliance](#) and spoke to their experiences with the Alliance as well as FPCs.

Figure 1: Food labor across the food system. From “Shining a light on labor: How food policy councils can support food chain workers,” a 2018 report by the Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future

