

Backbone of Sustainable Food:

Food Chain Workers & Their Working Conditions in Vermont



Photos by Emily Dumas

by the Vermont Fair Food Campaign

with technical assistance from:

Robert Sauté, PhD
Associate Faculty member
Labor Studies Program,
Indiana University School of Social Work

and
Jamie K. McCallum, PhD
Assistant Professor of Sociology,
Middlebury College

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Vermont Fair Food Campaign
294 North Winooski Ave. Burlington, VT 05401
(802) 658-6788 / kellyvffc@gmail.com

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Last year almost one in six Vermonters in the private sector worked in the food system. They held an estimated 57,858, or 16.25%, of private sector jobs.¹ According to the Vermont Grocers' Association, the food industry makes up 8% of state revenue, generates more than \$202 million in state and local taxes, and accounts for roughly 15% of Vermont's economy.² And, it's still growing.

The exciting potential of Vermont's sustainable food system is, however, stymied by the lack of sustainable jobs. The people who process, manufacture, and sell our food products have virtually no say in the conditions in which they work and don't have a voice in the sustainable food movement. They are poorly compensated, often lack benefits like healthcare and paid sick leave, and frequently experience intimidation when they speak up in their workplaces.

The Vermont Fair Food Campaign (VFFC) undertook this study to better understand conditions for food chain workers in Vermont. VFFC seeks to ensure that the sustainable food movement respects the rights of the workers who process, package, distribute, and sell our food. Low-paying, unstable jobs in the state's fastest-growing industry limit the market for the products being sold here. To reach its full potential and create an economically sustainable model, jobs in the food chain should be good jobs that match Vermont's growing presence in the movement for sustainable agriculture.

Findings:

- **Wages are low.** The average wage of workers surveyed was \$12.36 an hour—at least \$3.38 an hour less than what qualifies as a living wage in Vermont for a single working person: According to the Vermont State Legislature's Joint Fiscal Office, the livable wage for a single person without dependents is \$15.81 an hour for urban areas (\$15.74 an hour in rural areas). Almost 20% of workers surveyed needed an additional job to help make ends meet.
- **Hours and schedules are inconsistent.** Roughly a third of respondents said their daily and/or weekly hours changed from week to week. Inconsistent schedules and hours make it difficult for workers to plan their lives outside of work or predict what their income will be from week to week.
- **Healthcare is out of reach for many.** While 87% of workers surveyed said their employers offer some sort of health insurance, 37% of them did not use it (frequently because they could not afford it).
- **No paid sick time.** About one-fourth of respondents received no paid sick leave, and either had to lose pay or come to work when they (or their family members) were ill.
- **Health and safety is a concern.** 16% of workers surveyed expressed concerns about health and safety issues at work, and 23% reported injuries on the job.
- **Use of temporary workers is commonplace,** and these workers are often paid less and receive little-to-no benefits or paid time off.

¹ 2012 Farm to Plate Investment Program Strategic Plan

² "Vermont Food Industry Economic Impact Study," by John Dunham and Associates (New York), 2011. Commissioned by the Vermont Growers' Association.

Recommendations for Sustainable Food Jobs:

(See page 14 for our full recommendations)

1. Create a pathway to gainful employment
2. Create a pathway to permanent employment
3. Enact policies that provide livable wage jobs
4. Enact policies that provide paid sick leave
5. Strengthen and enforce laws that protect workers
6. Establish a Vermont Fair Food certification program
7. Allow food industry workers to exercise their right to organize

GLOSSARY

Captive Audience Meeting: An involuntary meeting between management and workers designed to instill fear and discourage employees from forming a union.

Food Chain: A series of connected individuals and entities that make up a food system, from source to consumer.

Food Chain Workers: People who work in a food chain or food system. For the purposes of this study, we classify food chain workers as those involved between the farm and the table— those who work in production, manufacturing, processing, packaging, butchering, meat-cutting, warehousing, distribution, transport, and sales.

Food Industry, Food Industry Worker: For the purposes of this study, synonymous with **Food Chain** and **Food Chain Worker**.

Food Insecurity: The lack of access to enough food to meet basic needs fully at all times due to lack of financial resources. Adults in households determined to be food insecure are so limited in resources that they run out of food, reduce the quality of food their family eats, feed their children unbalanced diets, or skip meals so their children can eat (Source: Hunger Free Vermont).

Livable Wage, Living Wage: A wage rate that takes into account local costs of living and is high enough to allow workers in that area to maintain a decent standard of living, if working a normal, full-time schedule.

Local Food: According to USDA spokesman Aaron Lavallee, what constitutes local food varies from state to state, but it's generally accepted that food from within 100 miles of the consumer can be considered local food. Within this study we have taken "local food" to mean food that is grown, produced, or otherwise sourced within the state of Vermont.

Organize, Organizing (a union): The process in which working people come together and form a democratic organization to make decisions about their jobs and livelihoods. By organizing a union, workers can negotiate contracts with their employers to determine terms of employment, including pay, benefits, hours, leave, job health and safety policies, and more. This process is also referred to as collective bargaining, and it's a way to solve workplace problems

Sustainability: Using a resource in such a way that it isn't used up or destroyed in the process.

Sustainable Agriculture: An integrated system of plant and animal production practices that enhances the environmental quality and the natural resource base upon which the agricultural economy depends, makes efficient use of nonrenewable resources, satisfies human food needs, and enhances the quality of life for farmers and society as a whole (Source: 1990 Congressional Farm Bill).

Sustainable Food System: A food chain that supports local businesses, stimulates local economies, promotes healthy and affordable food, maintains and improves the environment in which food is produced, and provides a livable income for those involved in food chain work (Source: Sustainable Food Laboratory, Hartland, Vermont. www.sustainablefoodlab.org)

Union: An organization of workers that represents and defends the interests of workers; when workers unite to negotiate issues such as pay, benefits, and working conditions with their employers.

Working Conditions: Environment, job safety, hours, and other circumstances under which work is done. The Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970 requires employers to provide workspaces free from dangers.

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INTRODUCTION

There is a large and growing interest in the production, distribution, and consumption of local foods in Vermont. Our state produces everything from maple syrup, beer, and coffee, to cheese, chocolate, ice cream, and much more. There are more than 300 specialty goods companies in the state, and the Farm to Plate Initiative (created by the state legislature) is developing an economic plan to raise the consumption of local foods from 3% to 20% by 2020. If food production in Vermont were to increase by a mere 5%, it would create about 1,500 new jobs in the state.³ The Vermont Fair Food Campaign is primarily concerned with insuring that food industry jobs—both existing and prospective— are sustainable.

The Vermont brand has garnered support from local food movements, such as the Vermont Fresh Network and the Farm to Plate Program, as a means of strengthening the local economy. In the 2011 Farm to Plate Strategic Plan, Governor Peter Shumlin attested to the value of the Vermont brand as a tool for economic growth. That same year, *Vermont Business Magazine* ranked Vermont second in the nation for export sales. Our high-quality local food products and commitment to a sustainable food system are a source of pride for many Vermonters and a contributing factor to making Vermont an attractive place to live.

Though food industry workers are critical links in Vermont's food chain, their work seems to be greatly undervalued. One example of this lies in the fact that processing and manufacturing wages for food workers are less than those of manufacturing workers overall (Vermont Farm to Plate Report, 2011).

The Vermont Fair Food Campaign (VFFC) is a statewide movement of food chain workers and community allies fighting to make sure the people who work in this industry receive fair wages, benefits, and healthy working conditions.

We believe:

- A **stable food system** begins with workers who are paid livable wages, and can afford to support themselves working reasonable hours at one job;
- A **healthy food system** begins with workers who have paid sick leave, and aren't forced to either lose pay or come to work when they're ill;
- An **fair food system** begins with workers who are organized and have a strong voice in their workplaces;
- A **sustainable food system** begins with sustainable jobs.

³ 2012 Farm to Plate Investment Program Strategic Plan

METHODOLOGY

This report is the result of over a year of planning, surveying and researching. The survey was developed by the Vermont Fair Food Campaign in order to assess the working conditions of food industry workers in the state of Vermont.

The survey asked workers a series of open-ended and close-ended questions about their current and previous jobs in the food industry. Survey questions covered topics such as wages, benefits, employment status (temporary or direct hire), and time working in the food industry.

This research is representative of workers from a broad spectrum of food industry jobs. Researchers consisting of Vermont Fair Food Campaign staff, volunteers, and food industry workers set out to interview at least 150 workers. The research team was trained in survey techniques prior to embarking on data collection.

We conducted the vast majority of surveys in person, at food industry workplaces, over a wide geographical area of the state, from July 2011 to July 2012. The remaining surveys were gathered by phone or using workers' social networks. This combination of sampling techniques was necessary since it was not feasible in this situation to construct a population. In total, 168 workers were surveyed. This final sample reflects workers in the Vermont food industry employed at 42 workplaces.

Anonymity was important to most of the respondents (who feared retribution if it was learned they had participated in this study). We have withheld workers' names, employers' names, and other identifying details from quotes and anecdotes used in this study to protect the jobs and livelihoods of our survey participants. Based on what workers have told us about the anti-union environments in which many of them work, fear of retaliation is justified and a sad indicator of the state of food workers' rights in Vermont.

INDUSTRY OVERVIEW: FIRST IN LOCAL FOOD

With a population of only 626,011 people (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2012), Vermont is a state that is widely known for its agriculture and sprawling rural landscape. This landscape serves as a reminder to Vermonters where our food comes from. The USDA local food index ranks Vermont first in local food consumption, with 99 farmers markets and 164 Community Supported Agriculture programs statewide.⁴ The number of people participating in CSAs is increasing, and 31% of stores audited by Healthy Retailers sold at least one variety of fruit or vegetable grown in Vermont (Farm to Plate Strategic Plan, 2011). The food industry in Vermont accounts for about 15% of Vermont's economy and generates more than \$202 million in state and local revenue (Vermont Growers' Association, 2011 study).

The Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that 23,230 people work in food prep and related professions in Vermont, and approximately 9,400 people work in retail food and beverage sales. About 5,100 people are employed by Vermont's food manufacturing sector.⁵ Many of Vermont's specialty foods (like cheese, beer, ice cream, etc.) must be processed and manufactured before they can be sold. Food processing and manufacturing is one of the fastest-growing industries in the manufacturing sector. Between 2007 and 2010 food manufacturing employment grew by 31%—one of only two manufacturing sectors that saw such an increase.⁶

There is much thought within our communities about where our food originates. Vermont consumers frequently ask themselves, "Is it local?" "Is it sustainable?" "Is it organic?" But we think far less about the journey our food takes between the farm and our tables, or about the people who are responsible for getting it there. The contributions of those who work in the food chain—in production, processing, packaging, shipping, warehousing, sales, etc.— are largely secluded from the public eye.

Conclusion

Food chain workers are the backbone of Vermont's food system. We depend on them to produce, process, transport, and sell the food we eat. Our state's much-acclaimed local food movement would not exist without them. And while the food industry in Vermont is growing (due in part to taxpayer-provided economic development aid), food chain workers are not seeing the benefits of that growth. Many of these jobs remain low-paying, and do not provide stability, benefits, or opportunities to qualify as sustainable. This scenario is not good for workers, for businesses, or for Vermont's food system.

Currently, much attention is being paid to our little state. We suspect that in years to come, many other states will look to pattern their own food systems after what's being done here. Vermont's sustainable food movement has the potential, then, to influence communities well beyond our state lines and even to set the tone for how food systems are structured across the nation. This is yet another reason to ensure that Vermont's growing food system is working toward good, sustainable jobs that enable workers to support themselves and their families.

⁴ "Local Food Index Ranks Vermont At Top, Florida At Bottom," by Lisa Rathke, Associated Press. 2012

⁵ US Bureau of Labor Statistics, May 2012 State Occupational Employment and Wage Estimates

⁶ 2012 Farm to Plate Investment Program Strategic Plan

SURVEY FINDINGS

VFFC staff and volunteers surveyed 168 hourly workers at 42 establishments in the Vermont food industry. The surveys were conducted primarily outside of workplaces, and we promised respondents confidentiality. Respondents worked in food processing, distribution, and retail sectors of the food system. At six of the establishments, surveys were collected from eight or more workers. Of those surveyed, 146 employees worked directly for the workplace employer while 19 were employed by temporary agencies.

Men accounted for 70 percent of the survey respondents. The ages of respondents ranged from 19 to 77, with 36% in the 26-34 age bracket, and 22% in the 35-44 age bracket. The median age was 34 years old.

The duration that respondents had worked in their current jobs ranged from one month to as long as 29 years, with the average length of tenure being almost five years (59 months). On average, women respondents had longer tenures than men (66 months on average). The mean length of service for men was 57 months. Jobs changed during many employees' tenures: 121 respondents had worked for their current employer for more than a year, and of those, 43% had a different position than the one at which they started.

Wages

Hourly wages for food chain workers ranged from \$8.00 to \$26.00. The average respondent earned \$12.36 per hour (\$11.92 for women and \$12.62 for men). This is well above the minimum wage for

Vermont, but still far from a livable wage for a single person with no dependents.⁷ The Vermont State Legislature's Joint Fiscal Office has declared that \$12.48 is a livable wage for the state; this is based on a two-income household with no children, where both people are married and filing jointly, and both have employer-assisted health insurance. We take issue with this for a number of reasons— firstly, because it's not representative of people with dependents, and doesn't take into account the costs of childcare or eldercare, which are substantial. It's also important to note that the JFO did not factor in student loans when determining what constitutes a livable wage.

“I've worked here for almost 30 years, but my pay is maxed out at less than \$15 an hour. The cost of everything is going up— I don't have a savings because my whole paycheck goes to bills— everything's going up except my pay.”

~ Cafeteria Worker, Burlington

Secondly, we take issue with this figure because a true living wage should be based on what an **individual** needs to provide for him or herself (and his/her family, if applicable), not what's livable for a small portion of the state's population. The JFO's own research has concluded that a single person living alone needs to make between \$15.74 and \$15.81 an hour to earn a living wage. For comparison, a single parent with two children needs to make between \$28.03 and \$29.82 an hour to earn a living wage (no workers we spoke to made this much).

⁷ "Basic Needs Budget and a Livable Wage," report by the Vermont Legislative Joint Fiscal Office. January 2013.

Among food workers the average hourly wage of \$12.36 translates to an income of \$25,709 a year, assuming that worker can steadily rely on 40 hours of work a week. This isn't a sustainable income for a single person, let alone those with families to support (see table 1). Therefore, the JFO's belief that \$12.48 an hour is a universally-suitable livable wage for the entire state is completely out-of-touch with the needs of working Vermonters and their families.

Table 1 – Basic Needs Budget from JFO, 2012

Vermont Basic Needs Budget – 2012				
(From Legislative Joint Fiscal Office report)				
Basic Needs	Single Person with No Children (Urban / Rural)		Single Parent with One Child (Urban / Rural)	
	Food	\$323	\$323	\$488
Housing	\$788	\$742	\$1,029	\$923
Transport	\$513	\$542	\$495	\$473
Healthcare	\$129	\$129	\$280	\$280
Dental care	\$10	\$10	\$39	\$39
Childcare	\$0	\$0	\$737	\$633
Clothing, household expenses	\$169	\$169	\$231	\$231
Personal expenses	\$84	\$84	\$84	\$84
Telecommunications	\$81	\$81	\$81	\$81
Rental insurance	\$11	\$15	\$11	\$15
Term life insurance	\$0	\$0	\$32	\$32
Savings	\$105	\$105	\$175	\$164
Total Monthly Expenses	\$2,213	\$2,200	\$3,682	\$3,443
Total Annual Expenses	\$26,554	\$26,400	\$44,179	\$41,318
Livable Wage	\$15.81 / hour	\$15.74 / hour	\$25.29 / hour	\$23.41 / hour

The median yearly increase in wages for workers was 2.3% (when adjusted for inflation), but **nearly one-fifth of workers' wages didn't change, and didn't keep pace with inflation from year to year: For them, real wages actually declined.**⁸ Some workers even reported a decrease in wages of as much as 5.3%.

It's also important to note that wages varied considerably by job description. Lower level managers and supervisors averaged the most: about \$14.13 an hour. Not far behind were the skilled technicians and tradespeople, whose average hourly wage was \$13.52. The lowest paid workers were those in retail sales, whose average hourly wage as a measly \$10.27. Production and manufacturing workers didn't fare much better— they averaged just \$11.95 an hour.

Given such low wages, how did these food workers make ends meet? **Approximately one-third of respondents say they took on an extra job in the last six months to help pay for basic needs.** One man who was working as a temp at a coffee facility made only \$10 an hour. Even working a second job, he

⁸ Note that we tracked wages for individuals over the course of their tenure at their current employer. Increases in wage rates may reflect changes in occupations and/or responsibilities as well as annual salary increases.

was still on government assistance and food stamps. As a temporary worker, he did not have paid sick leave or benefits, and he couldn't afford the company's \$90-a-week health insurance for himself and his dependent (It is also interesting to note that we spoke to a direct-hire worker from the same facility who did the same job, and he made more than \$15 an hour).

Another survival strategy for workers was to work longer: Over a third of the survey sample worked more than forty hours a week. Simply working more, however, proves difficult in an environment where workers report inconsistent hours and schedules (33% and 27%, respectively), making economic and family planning more precarious.

Hours

More than 90% of respondents worked 31 hours or more in the week prior to the survey. Nine percent worked 30 hours or fewer, 56% worked between 31-40 hours, and 35% worked more than 40 hours. For a sizable proportion of survey respondents, neither the number of hours worked nor shifts they were scheduled for were consistent from week to week: One-third reported that hours varied weekly, and 27% said their weekly schedules were irregular.

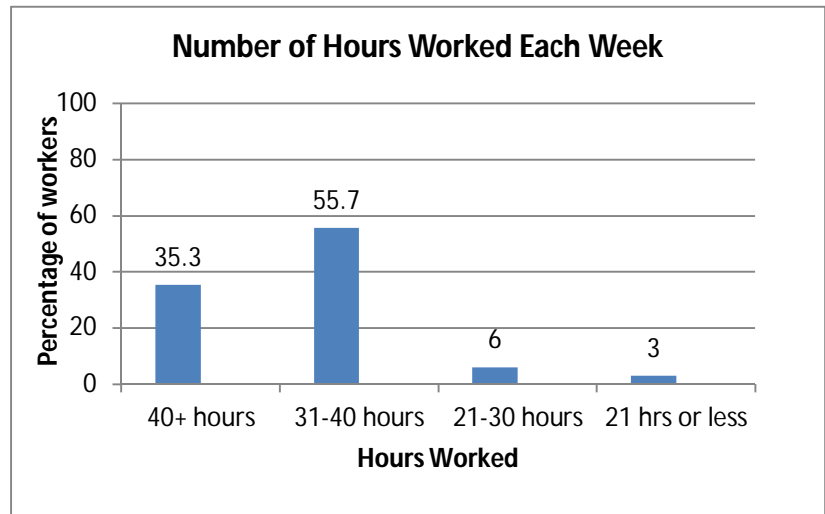


Figure 1 – Hours Worked by Survey Respondents

Benefits

About **one-fourth of people working fulltime or near fulltime had no paid sick leave: this means they either lost pay or had to come to work when they or their family members were ill.** About one-fourth of respondents who had worked overtime the week prior did not have paid sick days, despite the number of hours they worked.

One woman who made cheese at a creamery in Cabot said that she and her co-workers were only allowed to take 5 sick days a year. Because of this, she and other employees often came to work when they were sick— something that she expressed concern over for sanitary reasons.

It's also important to note that access to sick leave varied dramatically by job classification. While 100% of the managers/supervisors surveyed were able to take paid leave when they were ill, only 45% of retail workers were able to take paid sick leave. Most technicians and skilled tradespeople could count on paid sick leave when they needed it (81%). But less than half of production and manufacturing workers could say the same (46%).

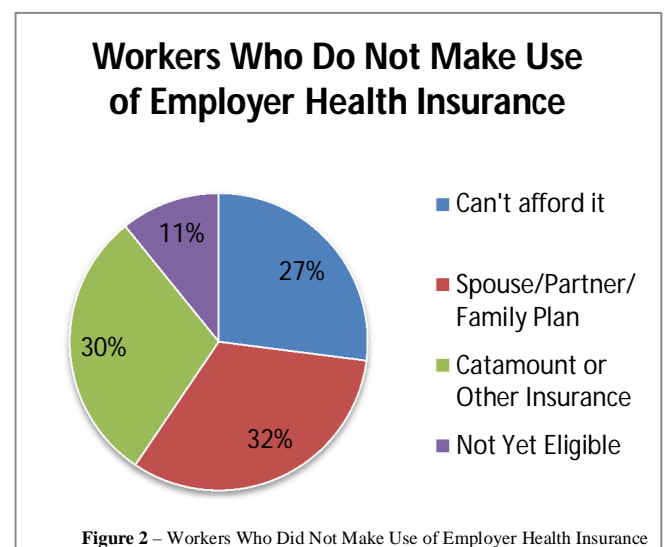


Figure 2 – Workers Who Did Not Make Use of Employer Health Insurance
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About 76% of the food workers surveyed had taken paid vacation, but only 14% of employees working less than 31 hours a week were eligible to take paid time off.

We surveyed food industry workers about the availability and access to health insurance through their employers (possibly the most important and expensive benefit). Of those surveyed, 87% of workers said their employers offered some kind of health insurance. But only 63% of them made use of it— either because they couldn't afford it, they already

had health insurance through a family member or through the state, or because they weren't yet eligible (see figure 2).

More than a quarter of those eligible for health insurance through their employers could not afford the premiums. The "other insurance" category also includes workers eligible for Catamount, the taxpayer-subsidized insurance provided by the state. We found that among those

who worked fulltime (40 hours or more a week), 77% used their employer-provided health insurance; 62% of those who worked 31-40 hours took advantage of health insurance available through their jobs. No respondents who worked less than 31 hours were enrolled in their employer-provided insurance plans.

Healthcare premiums were the obstacle for some food industry workers (see table 2). About one-quarter of workers talked about the

premium costs for their individual coverage. The average monthly charge was \$90 for individual coverage, or about 56 cents for every hour of work. For a worker to cover him or herself plus a partner, the average monthly cost shot up to \$195. And family plans were by far the most costly: \$227 per month on average.

Or to put this another way, food industry workers earning an average hourly wage of \$12.36 would have to work about 7.5 hours just to pay for their own

Affording Healthcare Premiums			
Average Hourly Wage	\$12.36	\$12.36	\$12.36
Type of Insurance	Individual coverage	+ Spouse coverage	+ Family coverage
Average Cost (Monthly)	\$90	\$195	\$227
Average Cost (Yearly)	\$1,080	\$2,340	\$2,724
# Work Hours Needed to Cover Cost of Premiums	7.5 hrs	16 hrs	18.5 hrs
% of Hourly Wages Going to Healthcare	5%	10%	12%

Table 2 – Affording Healthcare Premiums

“I always felt like I had no money to spend on healthful food. I was struggling to support a family and pay rent on \$11-something an hour. Even now it's still not easy— I'd like to buy local, organic food, but I can't afford to buy those products where I work.”

~ Grocery store worker, Burlington

Hunger & Food Insecurity in Vermont

According to **Hunger Free Vermont**, 32% of Vermonters cannot afford either enough food or enough nutritious food. One in five children (and 13% of Vermont households) experience hunger or food hardship. The group estimates that 5% of Vermont households are frequently hungry & have drastically decreased the quality and quantity of the food they consume.

In 2008, the Vermont Sustainable Agriculture Council published a study of local food initiatives that expressed particular concern about hunger in our state. To address this issue, SAC made the following recommendations:

- Research new methods for increasing access to local foods for Vermonters of all income levels;
- Support a National Farm Bill that supports family farmers;
- Allow for the use of electronic food stamps (EBT) at farmers markets, Farm-to-Family, Farm Share, and Farm-to-School programs;
- Expand the state Catamount program so that farmers do not have to be uninsured for a year before qualifying for healthcare;
- **Create a living wage so that all Vermonters are food secure & have sufficient income to purchase food at prices that reflect the true costs of production.**

“Understanding Vermont’s Local Food Landscape,” VT Sustainable Agriculture Council, 2008

healthcare premiums. Workers with spouses would have to work the equivalent of 16 hours to pay for both people's premiums. And workers with families would have to work a whopping 18.5 hours to cover this healthcare cost. These costs also do not reflect insurance co-pays, deductibles, yearly limits, or other factors (which differ by employer, but contribute even more to the overall cost of healthcare coverage for employees and their families).

Working Conditions

Working conditions and worker concerns vary by employer and occupation, **but 16% (one-sixth) of workers had health and safety concerns at work, including concerns about the healthfulness of the food they produce.** About 23% (or almost 1 in 4) of the workers surveyed reported having been injured on the job.

Almost 1 in 10 workers have experienced some form of workplace discrimination. The most frequent type of discrimination experienced was retaliation for speaking out. Some cases of age and sex discrimination were also reported, as well as a few cases of discrimination based on race, religion, sexual orientation, and disability.⁹ Employers have a responsibility to provide workplaces that are free from discrimination. When employers are unable or unwilling to do this, poor working conditions result.

“Management says ‘We want to communicate,’ but if you are honest, you get fired. Management wants you to act like you are grateful to have a job.... Sometimes everyone is happy and [there are] few issues. Then a bunch of people get fired for no reason and morale is really bad: *Then people want a union. They are scared, though, because of the firings.*”

~Clerk at a natural food market,
Burlington

An open-ended question about whether respondents saw organizing as beneficial elicited numerous responses that pointed to employer hostility to unionization. A majority of those surveyed thought a union might improve working conditions for them and their colleagues, but many were fearful of what management might do if they did try to organize:

- One man who worked at a brewery in Middlebury complained of long shift hours and benefits being taken away from staff. He thought a union would help, but feared there might be retaliation against employees if they tried to organize.
 - Another man who worked at an ice cream factory in Waterbury said employees would have more of a voice if they had a union, but that corporate was “too big to fight.”
 - One worker said he and others had tried to organize a union at his manufacturing facility in Burlington, but that management used mass firings and other scare tactics to intimidate employees into signing “no union” pledges.
-
- One woman who made cheese at a creamery in Cabot said that a union would be a help but, “management doesn't like people speaking out against workplace issues.”

⁹ Individuals could report more than one type of discrimination. We did not ask about the number of individual episodes of discrimination.

- Two employees who worked at a chocolate manufacturer in Williston said that the CEO of their company held a captive audience meeting with staff after it was rumored that some employees were speaking to union organizers. In the meeting he informed them the company was opposed to unions, and that no one should speak to union organizers or sign any union cards.

The National Labor Relations Act of 1935 gives private sector workers the right “to self-organization, to form, join, or assist labor organizations, to bargain collectively through representatives of their own choosing, and to engage in other concerted activities for the purpose of collective bargaining or other mutual aid or protection.”¹⁰ Firing or otherwise retaliating against employees for union activity is a violation of both federal law and a violation of workers’ basic human rights.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Create a pathway to gainful employment.

Provide incentives for employers that offer career-based jobs with stable hours, livable wages and benefits. Link taxpayer-provided economic development aid with these fair and socially-responsible labor practices.

Create a pathway to permanent employment.

Implement policies that put an end to the indefinite use of temporary workers as cheap or expendable labor. Temp workers often receive lower wages and fewer benefits than direct-hire, long-term employees. These workers should also have the opportunity for career-based jobs which offer benefits, fair pay, and more economic security for themselves and their families.

Enact policies that provide livable wage jobs.

Link taxpayer-provided economic development aid in the food industry with the creation of stable, livable-wage jobs. A stable workforce with low turnover rates makes for a more stable food industry. Conversely, there can be no true sustainability in our food system if many of the workers cannot afford to consume what they produce, or are forced to take additional jobs to meet basic needs.

Enact policies that provide paid sick leave.

Require that food businesses provide paid sick leave for their employees. It’s not healthy for our food system if the workers who produce, process, distribute, and sell our food come to work sick. No one should be forced to decide between losing a day of pay or coming to work when they (or their family members) are ill. It’s for this reason we also support state legislation around paid sick leave for all Vermonters.

Strengthen and enforce laws that protect workers.

Labor, anti-discrimination, wage and hour, and health and safety laws should be strengthened and enforced. Additionally, employers need to implement proper safety training and procedures, and provide adequate safety equipment to decrease the number of food workers who are being injured on the job.

¹⁰ 29 USC § 157 - Findings and declaration of policy, National Labor Relations Act (1935)

Establish a Vermont Fair Food certification program.

Allow consumers to make informed decisions about which businesses to patronize based on their workers' rights track records. A business that receives a VT Fair Food Certification must provide livable wages and decent benefits to its employees, adopt a neutral policy toward union organizing, and treat its workers with dignity and respect. Consumers often look for the Fair Trade label when shopping for foreign products. We want Vermont consumers to be able to support local food employers that provide sustainable jobs and fair working conditions to the people of our state.

Allow food workers to exercise their rights to organize.

We know that working conditions improve when people have a voice and a vote in their workplaces. Resources should be made available to food chain workers who wish to form unions: They should be informed about their rights under the law, and the benefits of organizing. Additionally, food workers should be able to speak freely to one another about unionizing without fear of reprisal or job loss. Employers should adopt a position of neutrality toward workplace organizing and should not attempt to dissuade or cajole workers through anti-union propaganda. Employers should not, *under any circumstances*, intimidate, threaten, or otherwise impede workers from exercising their right to form unions— these actions are illegal infringements on workers' rights and should result in loss of state development aid for any food businesses that engage in them.

CONCLUSION & FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The food industry in Vermont is diverse and can be found in communities all across the state. Food production, processing, packaging, transport and sales account for about 58,000 jobs, or 16% of Vermont's private-sector workforce.¹¹ The industry is growing, and will continue to grow as more Vermonters embrace locally-sourced food and food products. The Vermont Fair Food Campaign believes it's critical that food chain workers be involved in making policy and decisions about this industry as it goes forward.

The sustainable food movement has both a *responsibility* and an *interest* in making sure those who work in this industry receive fair wages, benefits, healthy working conditions, and are treated with dignity and respect.

In order to make our state's farm-to-table movement truly sustainable, there must be enough consumers in every community who can afford to buy the food being produced here. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, about 11% of Vermonters live in poverty (2012). Low-wages, lack of benefits, and job insecurity all contribute to poverty and hunger in our state.

The sustainable food movement has both a *responsibility* and an *interest* in making sure those who work in this industry receive fair wages, benefits, healthy working conditions, and are treated with dignity and respect. As Vermont's sustainable movement goes forward, the Vermont Fair Food Campaign

intends to bring the perspective of workers into discussions of our food system, and to work to address inequities within that system.

¹¹ 2012 Farm to Plate Investment Program Strategic Plan

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

As a first look into the Vermont food chain, this research points to future directions which demand more study. The use of temporary labor throughout the food industry is one area that is ripe for further study. We would be particularly interested to know what percentage of the food industry workforce is temporary, and exactly how their compensation stacks up against direct-hire employees doing the same work (our evidence on this is anecdotal rather than comprehensive). Additionally, it would be helpful to know how many of these temp workers want to work fulltime, the duration of time spent working temporarily for their employers, and how many temps are eventually hired in a permanent capacity.

While discrimination was raised as an issue in some workplaces, more research is certainly needed to determine the true scale and scope of discriminatory practices within the industry. It would be particularly interesting to look more closely at what form discrimination typically takes, how frequent the occurrences are, and what (if anything) is done in response to them. It would also be interesting to look more closely at how discrimination in the workforce differs by group (i.e. Does discrimination based on race or religion manifest itself differently than discrimination based on age or sex?).

Lastly, an area briefly touched on in this report was the issue of occupational health and safety. About 23% of workers surveyed reported having been injured on the job. We did not, however, ask about the timeframe of the injuries, type of injuries sustained, whether treatment was received, or the employers' responses/practices in regard to workplace injuries. It's an important issue that warrants more in-depth study in order to get a more complete picture of occupational health and safety for this industry.

NOTES ON THE SAMPLE

Access to food industry workers was an ongoing challenge throughout the surveying process, which is why the number of those surveyed for this study is not larger. Because of the fluid nature of food industry work (and some companies' use of temporary staffing), most workers had to be contacted on the street and outside of their workplaces. Given the lack of sources which provide comprehensive data on food chain workers, we chose to use this method in order to construct a fuller picture of the food industry in Vermont. There are strengths and limitations to our surveying method. Perhaps the greatest limitation of this survey is that our sample was not strictly random (though special effort was made to have as diverse a sample as possible).

We know, for instance, that 22% of those surveyed worked in food production and manufacturing; 18% worked in distribution, warehousing, or shipping and receiving; 17% were technicians, quality assurance, or skilled trade specialists; 14% worked in retail sales; 8% of those surveyed worked in food preparation.

Our sample was over-representative of specialists and distribution workers (35% of those surveyed). Specialists included brewers, electricians, machine operators and technicians, laboratory assistants, and other jobs that often require a special skill set or certification. Distribution included delivery drivers, logistics coordinators, forklift operators, and other jobs that also require specific technical knowledge, and sometimes a particular license or training. These types of positions tend to have higher rates of pay, and are much more likely to include benefits like paid sick leave.

On the other hand, those working in retail food sales and food preparation were under-represented: These positions are lower paid and less likely to include benefits. For this reason, we believe that the pay and working conditions for Vermont's food industry is, in fact, even worse than our findings have shown.

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BIOS:

Robert Sauté received his PhD in Sociology from the City University of New York, Graduate Center. He is a freelance editorial and research consultant, and can be reached at good.to.go.editorial@gmail.com.

Jamie McCallum, PhD, is an assistant professor of Sociology at Middlebury College, where he teaches courses in Labor, Political Sociology, and Social Theory. He has traveled throughout Africa, South Asia, Latin America, and Europe to understand the challenges and opportunities facing low-wage workers within multinational corporations. He is now working on a book based on his research on South African and Indian trade unions.

Cecile Reuge is a graduate student in the Food Systems Program at the University of Vermont, and a community organizer around social justice issues like healthcare, workers' rights, and food justice. She is currently writing her Master's Thesis on the social, political, and civil rights associated with citizenship amongst food workers in the unionized retail sector.

Samuel Cliff is a food worker in a specialty foods market in Burlington, Vermont. He is also the chief steward of his union, a contributor to this study, and a leader in the Vermont Fair Food Campaign.

Chad McGinnis works for the United Electrical Workers assisting members in creating more equity in their workplaces. He is a former organizer for the Vermont Fair Food Campaign, and a former food industry worker.

Kelly Mangan is an organizer for the Vermont Fair Food Campaign, a former labor organizer for childcare providers and nurses, and the former Field Director for Senator Bernie Sanders' re-election campaign.