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[Contents of Issue Menu](#)

[Click Here](#)

[Home](#)

**Workers Who Are Left Out in the Cold Forever
Solidarity America
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With all the hoop-la over "Joe the Plumber" and what will or will not happen if Barack Obama's tax plan or John McCain's tax plan goes into effect, it's easy to forget some of the most neglected, abused, and exploited workers in America - farm workers.

For more than 70 years, those whose back-breaking labor brings the food to tables across the nation have been left out of the mainstream of rights for workers under the labor laws of the 1930s.

There are other workers who suffer the same fate, as well, but probably no others have suffered in the way that farm workers have.

They have a minimum wage, but it's below the standard wage for industrial and other workers, and has been since there's been a minimum wage. They don't have a right to overtime and they're not covered by the federal law that gave most workers the right to organize unions and collectively bargain over wages, benefits, and working conditions.

This was the result of a deal between the administration of President Franklin D. Roosevelt and powerful corporate interests, which even then controlled the majority of food produced in America.

FDR did not want to endanger the agreement to allow industrial workers, and workers in general, from the right to organize unions, collectively bargain, and to work under standards that were fair - so, he agreed to leave out the most vulnerable, believing that they could be included in the near future.

That near future never came and farm workers have been at the bottom of the pay scale and the standard of living ever since. Some states have passed legislation to allow farm workers to organize and stand up for their rights, notably California. But, even there, where some of the exploitation has been most severe, the power of the growers has been such that their campaigns to keep farm workers in their place - using

violence backed up by the power of the state and its law enforcement agencies - has been largely successful.

For those workers, every day has been a struggle and every day has been filled with sweated labor. They are not paid for travel to work (often by contractors who take them long distances by bus or van) and they are not paid for down time. Their day can start as early as 4 a.m. and last until they get back home at 8:30 p.m.

States where there are significant numbers of farm workers who work in much the same conditions include Florida, Texas, and Arizona. There are, however, migrant workers in dozens of other states and nearly all states have numbers of farm workers, sometimes known as "hired hands." The latter are usually local low-wage workers who do essentially the same work as the individual farmer in the Northeast and upper Midwest.

Conditions for those workers are sometimes a little better than the migrant workers who are usually Latino or black, but they still are not covered by America's labor laws and the minimal protections those laws afford.

But, back to "Joe the Plumber" and the politicians' great concern for him. The big discussion on the campaign trail was whether he would be taxed more by Senator Obama or Senator McCain. Where Joe comes from, the average plumber would be making somewhere around \$49,000 a year and McCain was worried that Obama's tax plan would tax Joe more as he bought the business he worked for and his income rose to \$250,000.

The reality for farm workers is that, to achieve an annual income of even \$40,000 a year, their family of four would have to nearly double their efforts and that's just about impossible, because of their working conditions and the recruiting process by labor contractors or the employers, themselves.

And, the reality for farm workers is that no one is talking about their working and living conditions as a campaign issue - but, then, they don't vote much. The U.S. Department of Labor several years ago found that, despite the increased demand for American-grown fruits and vegetables, farm workers' wages have stagnated or have declined. A department report of 2001 described farm workers as being in "significant economic distress." This does not even take into account the handful of cases in Florida in the last decade in which employers have been cited for holding workers in virtual slavery, at low or no wages.

A case in point for growers who do pay is the situation of workers in the tomato fields of Florida. They pick tomatoes in 32-pound buckets, for which they are paid 45 cents for each bucket. That price had not increased by more than a few pennies for 30 years. Workers of today have to pick twice the number of tomatoes to earn the current minimum wage as they did to earn the minimum wage of 1980.

Generally speaking, that is not humanly possible. When they finally get to the workplace each day, they begin picking as fast as they can to maximize their income. A quick comparison: In the supermarket, a ripe-looking red tomato might cost \$1.99 a pound. That would be \$63.68 for the 32-pound bucket for which the worker received 45 cents.

While it's true that systems like the American food system are complex and contain all kinds of hidden costs, it's pretty clear that there is a great load of profit involved, especially if labor costs are minimized. It's what is called America's "cheap food" policy,

which has been in existence since the early 20th Century. American's believe that they pay too much for food and many do, but they pay much less than the real cost of the food, when the inhumane conditions of farm workers are considered.

The real cost of the food should be the difference between what those costs are now and what they would be if farm workers were paid a living wage, and received benefits and a pension.

The way to do that is to face up to the bullies of the economic system who have stood astride (or on) the workers for seven decades, and to change the labor law to include all workers, granting every protection to every worker, no matter where they work for wages on American soil.

That should be a top priority on the presidential campaign trail, because it is true that a nation's character can be determined by how they treat the most vulnerable. On that score, we have not done well.


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BlackCommentator.com Columnist John Funiciello, is a labor organizer and former union organizer. His union work started when he became a local president of The Newspaper Guild in the early 1970s. He was a reporter for 14 years for newspapers in New York State. In addition to labor work, he is organizing family farmers as they struggle to stay on the land under enormous pressure from factory food producers and land developers. Click [here](#) to contact Mr. Funiciello.

[Contents of Issue Menu](#)

[Click Here](#)

[Home](#)

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