CATA Members Join the Fight for $15

BY: JESSICA CULLEY, GENERAL COORDINATOR

For many years, CATA has been an advocate for higher minimum wages in all the states in which we work. In 2013, CATA members played a vital role in the campaign to raise NJ’s minimum wage by $1 to $8.25 through a ballot initiative. This year, once again, CATA members are at the forefront of the campaign for $15 an hour. Here, we share an editorial written just after the proposal was introduced in NJ raising the wage to $15, but leaving too many workers behind. The piece is referencing New Jersey specifically, but the arguments are universal. The federal minimum wage of $7.25 is not a fair or living wage and all but guarantees poverty wages to many workers across the country.

On Thursday, December 6, 2018 New Jersey Assembly Speaker Craig Coughlin introduced a bill to raise the state’s minimum wage to $15 an hour by 2024, but only for some of New Jersey’s workers. This proposal puts thousands of workers, including farmworkers, as well as youth workers, seasonal workers, and small business employees, on a different timeline, forcing most of them to wait until 2029 to reach a $15/hour minimum wage and caps tipped workers at just $5.13 an hour. New Jersey State Senate President Steve Sweeney called this proposal “smart and progressive.” I call this plan backwards and discriminatory.

As the Executive Director of a farmworker organization, I know that the exclusion of farmworkers from important labor protections is hardly new. Historically, farmworkers have been left out and left behind when the most important labor laws in our country were passed. To this day, in the state of New Jersey, the protected right of farmworkers to organize into unions is not clearly stated in state law. Neither do they have the right to earn overtime pay, although they may be working 7 days a week, 12 hours a day during the summer months. New Jersey established their first minimum wage law in 1966 that ensured farmworkers were guaranteed the same minimum wage as other workers. Farmworkers have never been excluded from the minimum wage in New Jersey and now is not the time to start.

Moving forward (or perhaps backwards would be a better word) with this short-sighted proposal would be devastating to the large agricultural workforce throughout southern New Jersey. It would leave behind some of our poorest families: hard working agricultural workers who labor long hours under harsh conditions to produce the fresh, healthy produce for which New Jersey’s farms are famous. They deserve a livable wage too. Going from the current minimum wage of $8.60 an hour to $15 an hour would translate...
How to be an Advocate with CATA!

In the new year, we will continue to focus on our advocacy work and we wanted to make sure to share with you the resources on how to take action. We expect many more attacks on the immigrant community, especially on the federal level. Now, more than ever, legislators need to hear from their constituents on these issues!

Here are a few steps you can take to advocate with us:

1. **Sign-up to our listserv** at www.cata-farmworkers.org to get email updates on issues facing the immigrant community.

2. **Visit** https://www.usa.gov/elected-officials for contact information for your federal, state and local elected officials. You can also be directly connected to US representatives by calling 202-225-3121 and US senators by calling 202-224-3121.

3. **Keep an eye out for CATA’s email action alerts** to know when to act.
   a. On a federal level, we will be closely following attempts to: deregulate policies that protect workers from pesticide exposure, compromise worker’s safety in poultry processing plants, encourage separation of families at the border, and criminalize the presence of undocumented immigrants.
   b. Next year, specifically in New Jersey, we will continue to advocate for expanded access to driver’s licenses and raising the minimum wage to $15/hour for all workers. You can find more information on those campaigns at www.letsdrivenj.org and https://raisenj.org/

**CATA Member Editorial on Minimum Wage**

This past Thanksgiving, CATA member Juan Garcia wrote an op-ed against the exclusion of farmworkers from a $15 minimum wage that was published on NJ.com.

As you and your family gather around the table to celebrate Thanksgiving, take a good look at what will be served at the table. You'll probably see mashed potatoes, sweet potato casserole, cranberry sauce, green beans, and apple pies. This year, let's give thanks to the farmworkers, who have labored through harsh conditions while earning low wages, to bring that food from the field to your table. I am honored to be writing on behalf of myself and my fellow farmworkers who work with me in Sicklerville -- part of South Jersey’s farm country.

You can read the rest of his article here: goo.gl/2cL8tL
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to $256 a week more for workers, enough to make a real difference.

For some perspective, according to the Economic Policy Institute’s family budget calculator, a single worker without children living in New Jersey needs between $18 and $22 per hour today just to cover the basics. And parents raising children and families, especially in the northern part of the state, need even more.

As an example, with New Jersey’s minimum wage at just $8.60, the poverty rate in Bridgeton, a low-income community where CATA works with many farmworker residents, is 32.3 percent—more than triple the state-wide rate of 10.7 percent. And the rate of child poverty is a jaw-dropping 42.2 percent. Overwhelmingly, farmworkers are married Latino parents supporting children and at least 1 in 4 farmworkers and their families live under the federal poverty line.

Carving out farmworkers from basic minimum wage protections is unprecedented in New Jersey, which has always guaranteed all farmworkers the full minimum wage. According to estimates, in transitioning to a $15 minimum wage the average individual consumer would experience price increases of less than three cents a year for a small package of blueberries—a very small amount compared with the sweeping benefits for needy farmworkers.

While we wish to give credit to lawmakers for helping New Jersey move to join the historic $15 minimum wage movement and begin reversing decades of falling pay, we believe that making such gains on the backs of farmworkers, or any worker, would be a disgrace and is unworthy of our state.

This year, CATA's organic community gardens have continued to flourish. Members have been working hard in their gardens in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Maryland to provide much needed access to organic produce for themselves and their families and the surrounding communities. Members also use the gardens to grow medicinal plants and herbs and to share with others their ancestral and cultural knowledge of remedies and agriculture.

In October of this year, CATA members held their Annual Assembly in PA where they participated in workshops on immigration, workers’ rights, and leadership, and held discussions on CATA’s new strategic plan.
I want to be an ally with CATA’s work for justice!

You can mail your tax deductible checks payable to:
CATA, P.O. Box 510, Glassboro, N.J. 08028

If you prefer, you can donate online through our secure website: www.cata-farmworkers.org

CATA is proud to be a member of EarthShare New Jersey (ESNJ), a non-profit organization created to support workplace giving and provide other resources to environmental nonprofits across the state.

For its 25th Anniversary year, ESNJ has received a matching challenge grant. Each donation received between July 1, 2018 and June 30, 2019 will be matched dollar for dollar until a total of $25,000 has been reached. Please consider supporting EarthShare NJ in its 25th year of working for our environment.

Also, please consider making a donation to CATA through your workplace. Don’t have a workplace giving campaign at your office? Contact CATA to assist you in setting one up.

For more information on ESNJ go to www.earthsharenj.org.