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Food frights: COVID-19 and the specter of hunger

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People in the United States began to suffer from food frights as social distancing measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 were put into place. Panic buying set in. Americans worried that supply chains would break down and that grocery store shelves would soon be empty. According to an article in the Wall Street Journal, retailers sold 3 months of food in 10 days in mid-March resulting in local shortages of high demand items like pasta sauce and toilet paper.

Worries over widespread food shortages in those first few weeks eclipsed the real hunger crisis on the horizon—one intimately tied to already existing inequalities. In the midst of the pandemic, the specter of hunger is haunting the same people it always has—the poor, the undocumented, low wage workers, the un- and under employed. It is not our supply systems that are breaking down and causing hunger, but our systems for ensuring people can access the food that exists which have been broken for a long time.

Take, for example, the failures of work as a system for making sure people can meet their basic needs. Most people living in the U.S. access food by working for wages. Even before the pandemic hit, millions of people did not earn enough to be able to afford food alongside other necessities like rent and transportation. Nearly 40 million Americans received SNAP (formerly food stamps) in 2019 and the vast majority of non-disabled, working aged adults on the SNAP rolls were employed. This is especially true for food workers, 13% of whom relied on SNAP to make ends meet in 2016 according to a study conducted by the Food Chain Workers Alliance. 46 million people got food from a food bank last year. Despite a vast, growing food safety net, 37 million people in the US were food insecure in 2018. Our imperfect systems of distribution could not end hunger before the pandemic, when unemployment was at its lowest

rate in generations. As unemployment soars to levels unseen since the Great Depression, the public institutions that make up the food safety net are straining to fill the gaps.

Food workers are at the forefront of our failing systems of distribution. They are some of the lowest paid, least secure workers in the economy. In large part this is because work that makes life possible, like growing and cooking food, has long been relegated to women and racialized groups of people—from immigrants in the fields and enslaved people before them to domestic workers and restaurant staff.

These workers, viewed as cheap and disposable before the crisis, are now deemed essential. And yet, they have not been provided with the protections and pay commensurate with their status. They are being asked to risk their lives for paltry wages and with no protections so that the rest of us can eat. Essential workers are making terrible choices between going to work and risking illness or quitting the job that pays the bills and puts food on the table.

Food workers are the canaries in the coal mine of a labor market and a safety net that keeps people mired in poverty and on the edge of hunger. But they are also leading the way—disrupting business as usual with walk outs and strikes at companies like Whole Foods and Instacart to demand higher pay and control over their work environments.

It is fitting that food workers, like other essential workers doing vital, life sustaining labor, are at the forefront of the movement to transform work in the midst of this crisis. With millions of people losing jobs and wages and the specter of hunger rising, COVID-19 has exposed the deep injustices of our current food system. As a society, we are faced with a choice. We can maintain a system where workers are paid next to nothing to keep grocery store shelves stocked for the people who can still afford to buy food. Or, we can fight for a food system and a broader economy that puts people to work doing the caring labor necessary to maintain life under conditions that maintain dignity. If we are serious about ending hunger in the United States, the choice is clear.

This article is part of the Topical Collection: Agriculture, Food & Covid-19.

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