

What our faiths say about Workers' rights

Core values

- **Expand legal avenues for high-skill, low-wage workers to migrate to the U.S.**
- **Ban foreign labor recruiter fees to prevent exploitation and human trafficking**
- **Ensure workers' job portability and ability to live legally with families**
- **Allow workers to apply for permanent residency and eventual citizenship**
- **Support employment-based visas – but not at the expense of family-based visas**

Transparent and humane immigrant worker policies that enable immigrants who work in the United States to be treated with respect and fairness is an important element of immigration reform. Since the 1940s, the U.S. has utilized foreign guest-worker programs as one of the vehicles to supply low-wage workers. During this time, foreign guest-workers have held restricted status, have had little in the way of workplace protections and have been vulnerable to abuse. The Bracero program (1942-1964) was particularly known for worker abuse and exploitation as well as racism and discrimination.

The U.S. currently has two guest-worker programs for temporary work lasting less than one year: the H-2A program for temporary agricultural work, and the H-2B program for temporary non-agricultural work. These programs allow employers to obtain permission to hire foreign workers on temporary visas after engaging in recruitment in the U.S. and promising to meet certain requirements regarding recruitment, wages and working conditions. Each program imposes on foreign workers a temporary, non-immigrant status that ties workers to particular employers and makes their ability to obtain a visa dependent on the willingness of the employer to make a request to the U.S. government.

When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien... shall be to you as the citizen among you, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt."

Leviticus 19:33-34

The faces of immigration

Antonio

Antonio came to the U.S. from Guatemala to earn money to support his family back home. He worked for 3 years in the food court of a federal building in Washington, DC— where he cooked, cleaned, and cashiered. The minimum wage in Washington is \$8.25/hour. However, he was paid \$6.50/hour for the first year, and \$7/hour for the second year. Antonio recalls, "I worked 59 hours per week, but was never paid for the hours I worked overtime. When I asked for a raise, my boss said that making \$6.50/hour was good enough for a Latino like me. My immigration status had never been an issue before I spoke up and participated in a strike. I then was detained by immigration officials."



From Good Jobs Nation, goodjobsnation.org.

Teresa

Teresa is a farm worker who left Oaxaca when she was four and began working in the fields when she was eight. Now at 32, she is totally disabled by arthritis as a result of the work. Teresa recalls, "I had to work out of necessity. I started working in the United States at 14 in California and in Washington State....Sometimes the foremen would...tell us to work faster or we would be fired....Another experience I had is that owners would pay us with a check that doesn't have funds....That happened three times. After [doing this work] for five years...everything changed. I kept working, but then I was diagnosed with arthritis when I was just 22 years old." Teresa has since used money she earned working in the fields for medical care, yet her health has not improved.



From *Stories from the Field*, a collaboration between Farmworker Justice and photojournalist David Bacon. See more stories at: www.farmworkerjustice.org. Copyright 2013 Farmworker Justice.



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“Without this ability, migrant farm workers will be a permanent underclass in our society, a social group that creates and prepares the food we eat but can never sit at the table.”

Our guest-worker programs need reform. They currently are not sufficient to address the demand for foreign labor by vital U.S. industries and have not successfully protected workers throughout the continuum of initial home country recruitment to final work within the U.S. Sound and humane workers’ rights policies reflect the principle that migrant workers have the right to decent working conditions, anti-discrimination and anti-retaliatory workplace provisions, the right to job portability, and the ability to bring immediate family members to the U.S.

Additionally, workers should have the ability to apply for permanent residency and eventual citizenship. Without this ability, migrant farm workers will be a permanent underclass in our society, a social group that creates and prepares the food we eat but can never sit at the table. Citizens and migrants alike have the right to a fair and humane legal immigration system that respects the dignity of all persons, prioritizes the cohesiveness of families and communities, recognizes the economic contributions of immigrants, and upholds our moral obligations to provide refuge and welcome for the sojourner.

How do current immigration bills compare to our faith principles?

Border Security, Economic Opportunity and Immigration Modernization Act (S. 744/H.R. 15): In the Senate’s immigration reform bill, agricultural workers and growers reached a historic compromise that would fill needed jobs and offer an incentive for undocumented workers to remain in agricultural work through an accelerated legalization process. This path would be based upon the AgJOBS bill.

Fraudulent Overseas Recruitment and Trafficking Elimination (FORTE) Act (H.R. 3344): Designed to prohibit foreign labor recruiters from charging overseas workers large fees to apply and receive jobs in the U.S., this bill would create a clearinghouse of foreign labor recruiters who must register with a U.S. government agency. Frequently, workers are exploited and misled by unscrupulous recruiters who promise them much higher wages and better living conditions than they actually receive.

Additional resources on worker rights:

Interfaith Worker Justice
www.iwj.org

National Farm Worker Ministry
www.nfwm.org

Coalition of Immokalee Workers
www.ciw-online.org

Interfaith Action
www.interfaithact.org



Interfaith Immigration Coalition | interfaithimmigration.org | May 2014 | African American Ministers in Action ▪ American Baptist Home Mission Societies of the American Baptist Churches, USA ▪ American Friends Service Committee ▪ American Jewish Committee ▪ Bread for the World ▪ Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) ▪ Church of the Brethren ▪ Church World Service ▪ Columban Center for Advocacy and Outreach ▪ Conference of Major Superiors of Men ▪ Daughters of Charity ▪ The Episcopal Church ▪ Franciscan Action Network ▪ Friends Committee on National Legislation ▪ HIAS ▪ Interfaith Worker Justice ▪ Irish Apostolate USA ▪ Islamic Information Center ▪ Jesuit Refugee Service/USA ▪ Jewish Council for Public Affairs ▪ Leadership Conference of Women Religious ▪ Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service ▪ Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns ▪ Mennonite Central Committee U.S. Washington Office ▪ Muslim Public Affairs Council ▪ National Advocacy Center of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd ▪ National Council of Churches ▪ National Council of Jewish Women ▪ NETWORK, A National Catholic Social Justice Lobby ▪ Pax Christi USA ▪ PICO National Network ▪ Presbyterian Church USA, Office of Immigration Issues ▪ Sisters of Mercy of the Americas ▪ Sojourners ▪ 3P Human Security ▪ T’ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights ▪ Union for Reform Judaism ▪ Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations ▪ United Church of Christ, Justice and Witness Ministries ▪ United Methodist Church, General Board of Church and Society ▪ UNITED SIKHS ▪ U.S. Jesuit Conference ▪ World Relief

2-3 million

Estimated number of immigrant farmworkers in the U.S.

85%

Percentage of fruits and vegetables produced in the U.S. by immigrant farmworkers, by hand

\$11,000

Average annual income for an immigrant farmworker (among the lowest paid workers in the U.S.)

60%

Percentage of immigrant farmworkers who have been in the U.S. for more than 10 years

Dangerous Work

- Falls
- Heat stress
- Dehydration
- Pesticide poisoning

Source: National Center for Farmworker Health

“The wages you failed to pay the workers who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty.”

James 5:41