Dead-end jobs in the food sector

By: Camille Phillips

Millions of American food workers struggle to make ends meet in low-paying jobs. They have little hope of advancement in their field of work and rarely receive health-care benefits. They often go to work even when they are sick because they can’t afford to take time off and their employers don’t offer sick pay.

This is the bleak picture the advocacy group Food Chain Workers Alliance paints with its recent report based on a survey of more than 600 workers nationwide.

“More than 86 percent of workers reported earning subminimum, poverty, and low wages, resulting in a sad irony: food workers face higher levels of food insecurity, or the inability to afford to eat, than the rest of the U.S. workforce,” the alliance writes in the introduction to the survey.

This huge number – 86 percent earning below a “living wage” — is the focus of several of news stories: from an LA Times article, "Few American food industry workers treated well, report says" to a Mother Jones piece, “Only 13.5 percent of food workers earn a living wage.”
The alliance calculates a “living wage” to be 150 percent higher than the regional poverty level, with an average salary of more than $18 an hour.

“According to the National Low Income Housing Coalition (NLIHC), the Fair Market Rent for a two-bedroom unit in the United States is $959. A full-time food service worker, working 40 hours per week, would have to earn $18.25 an hour to afford the two-bedroom unit.”

As someone who has earned an hourly wage much lower than $18, this definition rang hollow for me.

I currently earn less, in fact. And although I’ve lived in locations with both high cost of living (New York City) and low cost of living (Missouri) I’ve never paid more than $650 a month on rent. I’ve lived comfortably, but frugally, sharing apartments with roommates and spending little on clothes or entertainment.

The difference between myself and the 20 million people represented in this report, however, is that I have the potential to advance in my career and earn more income in the future. I can expect to someday receive benefits such as sick pay and healthcare.

Meanwhile, 81 percent of the workers surveyed by the alliance have never received a promotion. The types of jobs available in the food industry — working on farms, in processing plants, warehouses, grocery stores and food service — often aren’t the type where you can work your way up.

As a society, we call jobs such as these “dead-ends,” but they directly lead to the cheap food we can put on the table. It’s quite a price to pay.
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