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Dysfunctional Congress Left American Farm Workers in Limbo

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A farmworker wears protective layers while gathering produce in the summer heat, before receiving heat awareness education on Aug. 2, 2023 near Hemet, Calif. Mario Tama/Getty Images

Although Congress was able to make a deal on Sept. 30 to avoid a government shutdown, lawmakers quietly missed the deadline on the same day for the 2023 Farm Bill amid its dysfunction — leaving the [21.5 million people](#) working in the food and agriculture system still stuck in limbo. While Congress spends the bulk of its time fighting over leadership and the basic function of funding our government, reauthorizing the next farm bill is being pushed further and further back. Working people have been fighting for a safe and fair farm bill for years and can't afford gridlock any longer. Meanwhile, behind the scenes, a handful of industrial agriculture corporations [have consolidated control over the food system](#) and [have lobbied against bolstering labor protections](#) in the bill. It's time for Congress to put aside partisan politics, withstand lobbying pressure and put constituents first.

As longtime worker advocates, we speak each day with the people growing, harvesting, processing and shipping the food that our communities rely on. We hear the stories of folks working without protection from extreme temperatures — whether it's [scorching heat in Florida fields](#), [Kansas meatpacking plants](#), or [Illinois warehouse docks](#). We hear from workers toiling away at breakneck speeds for hours on end, often [without time to even get water or go to the bathroom](#).

This cruelty, in our view, isn't an oversight — it's the [lasting legacy](#) of enslavement and exploitation in America's food and farm system, as well as the absence of protections considered standard in so many other industries. The hallmark labor laws of the New Deal era — the National Labor Relations Act and the Fair Labor Standards Act — both excluded agricultural workers. Each of the 18 farm bills since 1933 have also failed to address their needs.

Over the years, working people have [steadily built power](#) and mobilized for better conditions and fair pay. Now, farm and food workers are demanding a farm bill that finally recognizes their contributions and respects these essential workers. Mirella Estrada, a member of the Farmworker Association of Florida, recently recounted her experience of long days in the field to nearly 100 congressional staffers, sometimes from 4 a.m. to 11 p.m. with just 15-minute lunch breaks and limited water. She remembered one day when a coworker wandered away to try to find shade under a tree to cope with the heat. “By the time we got there, his life was near ending,” she said. “We tried to provide CPR and dialed 911, but by the time they came, he had passed.”

Mirella's story is one of many. Food and farm workers in [Arizona](#), [California](#), [Florida](#) and [North Carolina](#) have already died on the job this year. Between 2017 and 2022, [121 workers died from heat](#), not including deaths blamed on other workplace accidents or underlying health conditions exacerbated by heat. Farm workers are now [35 times more likely](#) to die of heat exposure than other workers, according to the National Institutes of Health.

[Extreme heat is also making toxic pesticides more harmful](#) as the chemicals evaporate into the air more rapidly, filling the lungs of farm workers and drifting into nearby homes.

The agriculture system doesn't have to be this dangerous. There's a clear pathway forward, with many pragmatic measures before Congress that would make a major difference for food and farm workers. We support [Sen. Alex Padilla's \(D-Calif.\) bills to ensure workers have a voice at USDA where decisions affecting them are made](#); [Sen. Cory Booker \(D-N.J.\) and Rep. Ro Khanna's \(D-Calif.\) bill](#) to create safer conditions for processing meat and poultry, one of the most dangerous jobs in agriculture; [Booker's bill](#) to protect farmworkers that bear the burden of pesticide exposure; and [Sen. Peter Welch \(D-Vt.\) and Rep. Greg Casar's \(D-Texas\) bill](#) to ensure that USDA purchases food from companies that pay their employees a living wage.

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These kinds of bills are backed by voters across the country who understand the value of protecting food and farm workers. Nationally, [80% of voters](#) — across party lines — support more and better protections for food and farm workers. In a poll of voters in key agricultural states of Michigan, Georgia, Pennsylvania and Colorado, [61% of voters](#) identified the risk of illness and injury to food and farm workers as a threat to their own community.

Congress has the opportunity to do right by millions of workers and the majority of Americans who support a fair and safe food system. This year's farm bill must reimagine, remake and

reinvigorate our food and farm system into one that works better for workers, farmers, ranchers, and eaters alike.

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