



THE RIGHT TO FOOD

A law needed by food workers and communities across the UK

“The pay is terrible everywhere in these roles to be honest it’s not enough to cover bills and food - it’s just not good enough”

Female food retail worker’s response to the BFAWU Right to Food survey

Introduction

In recent years the number of people experiencing food poverty has rocketed. So much so, that this is a struggle no longer reserved for the unemployed or disadvantaged in-work poverty is on a shameful rise¹.

Whether in the public, private or third sectors; self-employed or the gig economy, in-work poverty is the lived experience for a significant portion of the UK's working-age people.

The Bakers Food and Allied Workers Union (BFAWU) has a long and proud history of challenging the blight of low pay and poverty - not just in the workplaces where our members are employed, but in the very communities, they and their families live in.

However, when it comes to food insecurity it is often assumed that workers in the food sector are protected from the difficulty in accessing affordable healthy food. Indeed, while food sector workers work day-and-night to ensure that there is enough food produced for everyone else, they themselves can often struggle to access the food they need.

This is despite, as the pandemic has shown, how important our members are to the functioning and well-being of our society. What can be more important than ensuring people have food on the table? But shamefully, too many food workers are struggling to earn enough leaving them to go hungry or short of the food they need.

As our survey, conducted for this report demonstrates, many food workers are struggling to afford basic foodstuffs. This appalling but all too real situation exposes a system that is failing our members, as well as many, many others who are vital to the functioning and well-being of our society but whose importance is not reflected in their pay.

The testimonies in this report are from the front line of the food sector and include responses from those working in production, distribution, hygiene, food retail and more. These are the real lived experiences of the people who have helped feed the nation during the global pandemic.

It feels to many of our members that at best they may receive some platitudes and warm words of appreciation as key workers. Yet these same people are often too poor to properly feed their families.

That must change. We are committed to fighting for that change.

That is why we will always fight for better pay and fairness at work for all our members.

And that's why we as a union are leading a campaign to enshrine 'the right to food' into law.

¹ <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/what-has-driven-rise-work-poverty>

The Right to Food

As part of BFAWU's drive to end the scourge of food poverty, the Union is leading a campaign to enshrine 'the right to food into law.'

Many people may believe that everyone already has a right to food. After all, the UN declaration of Human Rights article 25 states "*everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of themselves and of their family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services*"².

Placed at the beginning of the UN's list of necessities is the most essential of them all - food. It is quite literally a matter of life and death. Yet seven decades on from this declaration, that right has not manifested into action or delivery. As such it remains a right that is rich in rhetoric but tragically neither enjoyed nor implemented around the world, including here in the UK.

Hunger in the UK is not a new problem. Tory austerity policies have fuelled the rise of food bank Britain as living costs soar whilst pay has been cut and the social security safety net dismantled.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought the hidden daily struggles of many into the public domain. The support for Marcus Rashford's campaign which forced the UK government to U-turn on free school meals provision during lockdown³ has shone a light on the reality of food poverty, especially the impact on young people and children. The Food Foundation estimate that "2 in 5 UK children living below the poverty line miss out on Free School Meals."⁴

During the pandemic, the importance of food workers was self-evident. The importance of that role must now be respected and met with action to end poverty pay and exploitative conditions, which can price food workers out of the very products they produce.

'A right to food enshrined in law *and* delivered in practice is urgently required.

The time is right to make the case for 'the right to food', to make food truly accessible, affordable, healthy, safe to eat and fairly produced by well-paid and protected staff throughout the food sector.

² <https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/nov/08/marcus-rashford-forces-boris-johnson-into-second-u-turn-on-child-food-poverty>

⁴ Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee - Covid-19 and the issues of security in food supply
<https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/5360/documents/53400/default/>

Poverty Britain

The conditions are ripe for food insecurity where people are failing to meet their basic needs.

In the UK in 2019/20, pre-pandemic it was estimated that “11.7 million people were in relative low income before housing costs (18% of the population), (which is) at a similar level to the year before. 14.5 million were in relative low income after housing costs (22%), also at a similar level to the year before”.⁵

“Looking specifically at children 3.2 million children were in relative low income before housing costs (23% of children), an increase from the year before. 4.3 million were in relative low income after housing costs (31%), about the same as the year before”.⁶

It is said that “working-age adults living in families where at least one person is in work, make up the majority (58%) of all working-age adults in relative low income”. While “children living in working families comprise the majority (73%) of children in relative low income”.⁷

In Scotland, it is reported that 260,000 children are in poverty and of those 68% are living in a household where at least one parent is in work⁸. Tragically, “Child poverty has increased by 3 percentage points - the most sustained rise in relative child poverty since the early 1990s”⁹.

These statistics do not lie. Food workers need a pay rise. Wages are too low; the children of workers are being penalised and their children are suffering and going hungry as food insecurity grows. A two-pronged campaign to increase pay and deliver a legal ‘right to food’ will be central to our campaigning work over the coming period.

⁵ Poverty in the UK Statistics: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn07096/>

⁶ Poverty in the UK Statistics: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn07096/>

⁷ Poverty in the UK Statistics: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn07096/>

⁸ Child Poverty Action Group (Scotland). Child Poverty in Scotland: The Facts, Available at <https://cpag.org.uk/scotland/child-poverty/facts>

⁹ IFS – Living Standards, Poverty and Inequality in the UK Available at <https://www.ifs.org.uk/uploads/R170-Living-standards-poverty-and-inequality-in-the-UK-2019-2020%20.pdf>

Why our communities need right to food legislation

The true scale of food poverty in the United Kingdom is not definitively known, but what is clear is it is rising at an alarming rate. The recently published Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee report on Covid-19 and the issues of security in food supply summarised the growing issue of food insecurity in the UK both during and prior to the pandemic. They reported how:

“Anna Taylor of the Food Foundation told us that in the six months prior to 9 February 2021, 9% of all households had experienced food poverty and 12% of these were households with children. This translated to 5.9 million adults and a further 1.7 million children. Emma Revie, Chief Executive at the Trussell Trust, explained that throughout the pandemic, its food banks had “distributed more than 1.2 million emergency food parcels [...], which was a 47% increase on the previous year. This was building on year on year increases in the previous five years. We saw a 74% increase in demand over those five years...”¹⁰”

These stark figures have prompted food charity, campaigns and a public debate over the right to food. There are several organisations throughout the UK mitigating against the impact of food poverty and trying to help those hit by it. Similarly, there are a variety of groups campaigning for improvements in employment, housing, welfare and other policy areas in the fight against hunger.

The number of people reliant on food charity is both shocking and growing exponentially.

Every corner of the country will have people who are experiencing food insecurity, however particular hotspots or “food deserts” have been identified in Hattersley in Greater Manchester, Rumney in Cardiff, Everton in Liverpool and Dalmarnock in Glasgow¹¹.

The societal impacts of food insecurity are profound especially when it comes to the physical and mental health of people who experience it.

The Trussell Trust’s ‘State of Hunger’ report suggests that 75% of people who have used food banks have a health issue or live with someone who does¹². Moreover, End UK Hunger’s 2018 report ‘Why End Hunger?’ highlighted several studies which demonstrate the link with poor mental health. They reported that “...people experiencing food insecurity are more likely to report depression and anxiety. Food insecurity damages the mental health of children as well, and early life experiences of hunger have scarring effects many years later, with child hunger associated with suicide ideation and poor mental health in teenage years¹³”.

The big drivers of food insecurity are economic - most food bank users for example have had a problem within the benefits system, but perhaps most alarmingly 40% of people referred to food banks were actually having money taken off their benefits to repay debts - more often than not those repayments were being made to the Department of Work and Pensions itself.

¹⁰ Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee - Covid-19 and the issues of security in food supply

<https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/5360/documents/53400/default/>

¹¹ <https://www.smf.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/What-are-the-barriers-to-eating-healthy-in-the-UK.pdf>

¹² https://www.stateofhunger.org/?_ga=2.191369002.1808114859.1618448753-1148688018.1618448753

¹³ <https://www.endhungeruk.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Why-End-UK-Hunger.pdf>

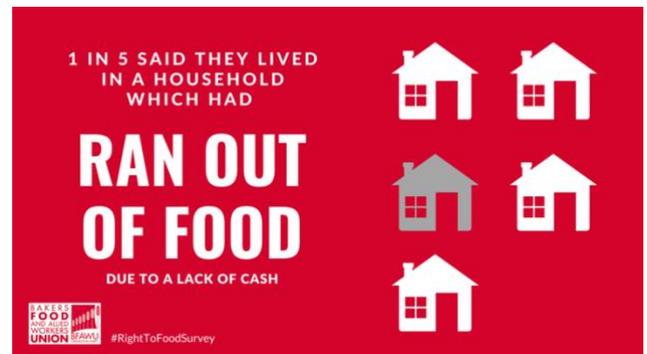
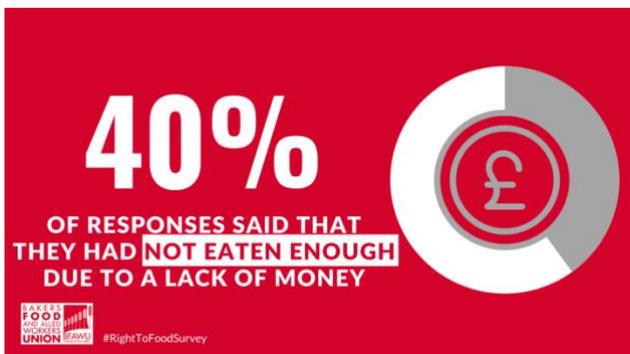
Food Workers' Survey - why food sector workers need right to food legislation

Between February and March 2021 BFAWU conducted a survey aimed at food sector workers to understand their experiences of food insecurity and food poverty.

As the forgotten key workers of the pandemic, employees in the food sector have given so much to feed the country but as the responses suggest, many have been struggling to feed their own family.

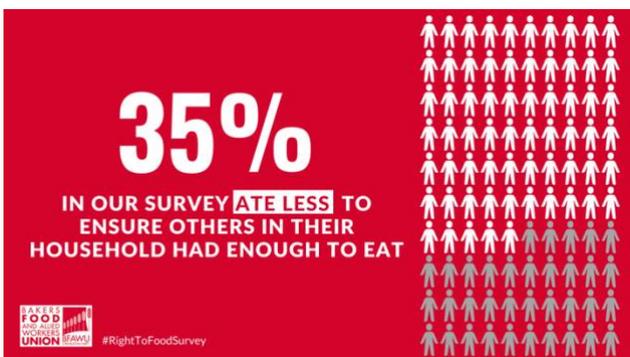
In some situations, this presents the most grotesque example of inequality in our country - where the people producing food for everyone else cannot even access those products for themselves.

The BFAWU survey had 227 responses and found that **40%** of respondents have eaten less than they thought they should have at some point during the pandemic, due to a lack of money.



19% reported that there had been a time during the pandemic where their household had run out of food due to a lack of money.

Over **35%** said they had gone without enough food to make sure others in the house could be fed properly.



More than a fifth of people have required the support of friends and family to put enough food on the table.

Not only was there a reliance on friends and family but over 7% of the respondents reported having at least once having had to rely on a food bank to feed their household.



**MORE THAN 7%
HAD EXPERIENCE
OF RELYING ON A
FOOD BANK TO
PROVIDE MEALS**

7.5%

BAKERS
FOOD
AND ALLIED
WORKERS
UNION BFAWU
#RightToFoodSurvey

The infographic features a red background. On the left, white text reads 'MORE THAN 7% HAD EXPERIENCE OF RELYING ON A FOOD BANK TO PROVIDE MEALS'. The words 'FOOD BANK' are highlighted in a white box. On the right, a white shopping bag is filled with various food items like bread, fruit, and cans. A large white box on the bag displays '7.5%'. At the bottom left is the BFAWU logo and the hashtag #RightToFoodSurvey.

With an even greater proportion reporting that they have had concerns about running out of food the BFAWU survey suggests that food insecurity is a significant issue for workers in the food sectors.

The survey went on to ask people about how these experiences had made them feel.

It is important to remember that while our TV Screens often covered the heroic work in horrific circumstances of the medical professions during the pandemic, workers in food production, food distribution and food retail were not afforded that interest.

Even though, from day one of lockdown these sectors have been working on-site - at times in areas which are not able to ensure social distancing- the weekly ‘clap for carers’ was never repurposed to give appreciation for the people who were producing food for the nation.

In Section 2 the first question asked: *what do you think the public knows about how your work has been during the pandemic?*

Responses to this question were fell into 3 main categories:

1. a straight “Nothing” (which most provided)
2. a more detailed expression of ‘people don’t know about how things have been’
3. a feeling of ‘everyone is struggling right now, not just me’

However, secondary themes were also persistent these covered the amount of hours available, the uncertainty or loss of wages - particularly sick pay if having to isolate - and the pressure felt to go into work when other colleagues were off.

The respondents were asked what the hardest thing for them personally had been about working on-site during the pandemic. There were 4 major themes identified in these responses and these often overlapped:

1. COVID health risks to them and their families
2. The uncertainty of work and wages and personal finances
3. Wider impacts of lockdown measures - being allowed to work but not see family
4. Mental Health concerns

On COVID health risks to them and their families' workers said:

“Living in a household of 6 others and Knowing I could possibly get covid returning back home every day.”

Male food production worker, England

“Feeling you are putting your health at risk to do your job.”

Female food retail worker, England

“Knowing there is a virus out there and you have to get on with it to feed your family and loved ones and also care for those suffering from the pandemic by being present at work to observe my duty.”

Male food production worker, England

On the uncertainty of work and wages and personal finances contributions included:

“I should have been shielding but my work refused to furlough me. I had no choice but to work because I couldn't afford to be on SSP.”

Male food production worker, Scotland

“Shielding and on reduced wages. I have been feeling depressed during my time off work due to being confined to the house.”

Male food production worker, England

“What is shocking our employer said to us that if we gonna be ill because of covid19 they will not have to pay us if we have to self-isolate. Every case of covid19 in factory will be individually considered whether they should pay... I think every employee should get paid with no doubts if they have to self-isolate. Stress and financial uncertainty whether I will get a salary if I get covid19.”

Male food production worker, England

“Worry of catching the virus and giving it to vulnerable family members and worry about losing job.”

Female food production worker, England

Responses about mental health concerns included:

“Workmates suffering from mental health issues.”

Male food production worker, Northern Ireland

“I’m frightened for my job security and it’s hard to juggle work and homeschooling. It’s taken its toll on me mentally.”

Male food production worker, England

It’s clear from some of the experiences reported in Section 1 that a substantial number of workers had concerns about food insecurity. In Section 2, of the survey, the workers were asked what a pay rise would mean for them and their families.

Unsurprisingly the majority of respondents would welcome a pay rise. However, beyond that, some responses alluded to the very real and damaging nature of low pay and insecure work, especially in the midst of the pandemic.

These are some of the testimonies from those explaining what a pay rise would mean:

“We could eat properly and pay bills.”

Female food retail worker, England

“I’m currently minimum wage, zero hours. A pay rise would mean I could start to get some more independence and perhaps escape what is a very difficult and unhealthy situation at home.”

Male food production worker, England

“The pay is terrible everywhere in these roles but to be honest it’s not enough to cover bills and food it’s just not good enough”

Female food retail worker, England

It should be noted that given that a significant proportion of respondents were BFAWU members in unionised workplaces they recognised that their employers had delivered some form of an increase in the last year. However, respondents across the board **did not** believe their pay reflected the importance of their role.

It is evident that respondents felt scared about going to work and bringing COVID home; they were distressed about the possibility of getting COVID and losing pay or shifts and for many respondents, they were in jobs which they felt already left them on low pay, insecure contracts and in vulnerable positions. All this against a backdrop of feeling unrecognised throughout such a stressful period.

So, when asked ‘*do you think the public would be surprised to hear that people helping produce food for the country can often be priced out of the products they produce?*’ It is little surprise that responses overwhelmingly suggested the public would unaware that food poverty exists for workers in the food sector. Most of the responses reiterated that this was likely again because the public had no understanding and paid no attention to the sector.

What could a right to food deliver, and how do we implement it?

Firstly, a statutory right to food would mandate the government to address the key drivers of food poverty to ensure people were able to fully access their right to food. The scope for this could be revolutionary in tackling hunger and poverty. Long-term benefits could include improved educational attainment; physical and mental well-being which in turn reduces costs associated with poor health and an increase in crime, as well as meaning businesses, have a healthier, happier workforce.

In their submission to the National Food Strategy, Ian Byrne MP and his colleagues argue for a Right to Food through five key ‘Ingredients’¹⁴ to provide a ‘legally binding route out of food poverty for millions of people in the UK’. These are: universal free school meals; community kitchens; reasonable portions in benefits and wages; ensured food security and independent enforcement.

Taking the first of those ingredients - the benefits of universal free school meals continue to be recognised by numerous anti-poverty groups and political parties - Labour has included manifesto commitments to their expansion in previous UK elections and numerous parties in Scotland are currently committing to increase coverage there following the Scottish election. The attention drawn by Marcus Rashford’s campaigning on the issue to the important role they play for families has only added to the overall public awareness of the support they offer.

Byrne and others also make the case for ‘insourcing’ as opposed to the patchwork or segmented and outsourced nature of so many public services. As they note “If school kitchens become an engine of better nutrition for our kids during the day, why should they not be equally well-utilised during evenings, weekends and school holidays? There should be a legal framework of duties, shared by national, and local government as well as state-funded schools themselves, to provide community kitchens; providing dining clubs and meals-on-wheels for the elderly and vulnerable, school holiday meals for those most in need and cookery clubs and lessons for the wider community. This policy might be as powerful a tool in tackling loneliness and social isolation as in tackling food poverty and obesity in our nations.”

There is a real opportunity through community ownership of food services to empower the communities and people who have been cast into food poverty. Rather than been stuck with only the option of emergency charity from food banks, but as a respected part of collective and structural response in ensuring access to food.

In the world of work and wages, right to food legislation could result in some transformational improvements. A government setting a minimum wage rate that is not a living wage would clearly not meet the measure of ensuring a person can access their right to food. BFAWU, therefore, believes the minimum wage should be irreversibly linked to the living wage as a minimum, but there is evidently a need for that baseline to be lifted to at least £15 per hour.

Similarly, a government that continues to allow the use of zero-hours contracts that have no guarantee of hours of work, and therefore pay, would also fall short of satisfying a right to food. These policies would have to be addressed to show the government was trying to ensure all workers were having their right supported.

¹⁴ <https://www.ianbyrne.org/right-to-food>

In social security too, there are a series of improvements this legislation could deliver. The State of Hunger 2019 report highlights numerous problems within the benefits system which drives people to food banks including reductions in the value of benefit payments, being turned down for disability benefits, being sanctioned, and delays in payments like the five weeks wait for Universal Credit¹⁵. All of these punitive policies push people into poverty - enshrining a right to food in law could provide a bulwark against these.

Enshrining a right to food in law must include a statutory requirement for Government to comprehensively measure and report on the levels and impact of food poverty in the United Kingdom. If the pandemic has taught us anything we must test, trace and eliminate threats to help society as a whole. By properly measuring and recording, governments could be held far more accountable for their performance with regards to the health of the nation, in particular the number of people being lifted out of food poverty each year.

A government that was serious about ending the scandal of food poverty in this country would embrace Right to Food legislation and have a Food Poverty Impact Assessment to accompany every budget and Queen's speech.

Furthermore, by legislating for the right to food wholesale and not just on a policy by policy issue, it would provide additional security and positive measures that could not be removed easily. As Elaine Smith, Member of the Scottish Parliament noted in her proposed Scottish Right to Food Bill, stakeholder support for her proposal from the Scottish Human Rights Commission suggested the legislation "could also serve as a formal safeguard against any future regressive changes in governmental policy, because the law would stipulate the basic principles of the national food policy that may only be amended with the legislature's approval"¹⁶.

What's more, legislating for a right to food could ensure those people with lived experience of food insecurity, food producers, and other key stakeholders, have meaningful involvement in policy decisions about food and to influence the rules that affect the food we eat. Since the UN declaration over 70 years ago, the ruling classes have not eliminated hunger and food insecurity from our communities - to do that we must give communities a say in what they need.

A right to food in the long-term is not just about eradicating food insecurity - it is about taking a whole-systems approach to tackling challenges such as poverty, diet-related illness and climate change. It is the responsibility of governments to join up policymaking, to recognise these connections and tackle them in progressive ways.

In the 6th richest economy in the world, we should not be relying on charity to feed our communities - a right to food could eradicate the stigmatising food bank model. Restructuring relationships with food altogether - giving ownership to people and communities themselves through community larders and food coops. It could mean not having to rely on Premiership footballers to shame governments into feeding hungry children during a global pandemic and instead providing nutritious meals for all school pupils as part of their education.

Not only are the opportunities for this type of legislation significant so too is the overwhelming level of public backing - with the Sunday Post recently reporting that there is now 81% support for the right to food to be enshrined in law¹⁷.

¹⁵ <https://www.trusselltrust.org/state-of-hunger/>

¹⁶ https://archive2021.parliament.scot/S5MembersBills/20200623_Final_Right_to_Food_Bill_.pdf

¹⁷ <https://www.pressreader.com/uk/the-sunday-post-newcastle/20210124/282346862470173>

Conclusion

Our report highlights the harsh truth of food poverty.

No one should go without food in the 6th richest country in the world yet shamefully, too many food workers are struggling to earn enough to purchase the very food they produce.

While the pandemic has shone a light on many of the real key workers in this country - we can't allow those who still go without fair pay to be failed any longer.

Food sector workers have told us that their households have run out of food at times during the pandemic - many more have been worried that they too could find themselves in that position, suggesting the problem could be even bigger were there to be the slightest change in pay, cost of living or welfare.

For some workers, meals are at times provided by friends and family for other people have relied on food banks despite working to provide food for the nation.

These experiences are in the most part from staff who have not been working from home for the past year. They are from workers going out every day to ensure shelves are stocked and fridges are filled. Workers who have said they fear catching the virus at work and then losing pay or even their job.

As the largest independent Trade Union in the food sector in the British Isles, BFAWU has fought for our members for over 175 years - workers not being paid enough to feed themselves and their families should be consigned to history. As the country emerges from this pandemic and returns to some normality, we must leave behind the Dickensian experiences of workers going without enough food.

The time is right for the right to food to be enshrined in law, to make food truly accessible, affordable, healthy, safe to eat and fairly produced by well-paid and protected staff throughout the food sector.