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Buy Better: How Food Policy Councils Leverage Procurement to Improve Food Worker Conditions

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KEYWORDS:

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ABSTRACT:

Food system workers; farm laborers, grocery clerks, restaurant staff, and food processors are the backbone of our everyday meals, yet their voices are largely missing from the councils that shape local food policy. Despite being essential to food security and community health, these workers face low wages, poor working conditions, and limited protections. Food Policy Councils (FPCs), which aim to advance equity and sustainability in food systems, rarely prioritize labor issues. The study, drawing on national survey data and interviews with over 25 FPC leaders, finds that structural constraints, internal conflicts, limited capacity, and weak connections with labor organizations prevent meaningful engagement with labor concerns. To create fairer, more inclusive food systems, FPCs must actively include frontline workers in decision-making, leverage local policy tools to improve labor standards, use public procurement to reward ethical labor practices, and build stronger partnerships with worker advocacy groups.

BACKGROUND:

Across the U.S., food workers remain essential at every stage of the food system—growing, packing, processing, transporting, stocking, selling, cooking, serving, and cleaning up food- yet they endure some of the most exploitative labor conditions in the country. These jobs, increasingly held by racialized and economically vulnerable populations, are marked by low wages, lack of access to healthcare and paid sick leave, unsafe environments, unpredictable schedules, limited benefits, and exposure to harassment and violence. Immigrants and workers of color make up the majority of laborers in the most strenuous and underpaid positions such as farm work, food processing, and back of the house service jobs.^{1,2,3} Despite their critical role in keeping our communities fed, food workers are often invisible in public policy decisions.⁴ One overlooked but powerful strategy for addressing these inequities is values-based procurement—institutional purchasing that prioritizes food sourced through equitable, sustainable, and transparent practices. Unlike traditional procurement, which prioritizes cost savings, convenience, and food quality, values-based procurement considers how food is produced, who produces it, and under what conditions. Such values-based procurement models include the Good Food Purchasing Program (GFPP) which advances five core values: local economies, nutrition, environmental sustainability, a valued workforce, and animal welfare (GFPP, 2024).

Food Policy Councils (FPCs), which have traditionally focused on nutrition and food access^{5,6} are now shifting to include labor justice as a core value. Yet many FPCs still under-prioritize food workers in practice.⁷ As trusted local coalitions that convene diverse food system stakeholders, we argue that FPCs are uniquely positioned to champion values-based procurement.

This policy brief draws on our mixed methods study, including national survey data of FPCs and focus groups and interviews with over 25 FPC representatives and leaders across the United States to examine how food policy councils are addressing food labor issues. We focus on how FPCs are leveraging values-based procurement strategies such as the GFPP as a pathway to more just labor practices in food systems. When cities and institutions align their food purchasing power with fair labor standards, it creates tangible opportunities to transform working conditions across the food chain.

KEY FINDINGS:

1

Turning contracts into change: How FPCs are advocating for labor rights through procurement.

Findings from our research reveal that some FPCs have begun to build relationships and coalitions that include a pro-labor platform and have had success in advocating for policies that prioritize fair labor standards and policies, such as higher wages and improved worker benefits. The most effective method we observed for FPCs making a positive impact on labor conditions in their regions was through coordinating and supporting the adoption of values-based procurement policies, including through the GFPP. GFPPs provide a supply chain approach to improving food production standards whereby public institutions, such as city governments and school districts, agree to a set of values or priorities for their contracted suppliers and providers across the food chain, from agriculture to food service.

KEY FINDINGS:

In order to gain a contract with an institution with a GFPP, food businesses must follow procurement guidelines, such as respecting the right to organize a union, paying food workers a living wage, and providing safe and healthy working conditions.

Procurement programs have been initiated and supported by Food Policy Councils in cities like Los Angeles, Chicago, and Philadelphia through conversations and collaborations between food workers, unions, and locally owned businesses who want preference for government contracts. These FPCs connect across food business, government, and social organizing sectors and are able to coordinate these programs. While some businesses that want to partner with FPCs and public institutions have sought to weaken the labor elements of GFPP agreements, they are nonetheless obligated to commit to all provisions if they wish to secure a contract in a city or institution where the GFPP has been enacted. As noted by a representative from the HEAL Food Alliance, a national food and racial justice coalition, during our interview:

“The strength with GFPP in particular is that all five of the value categories [local economies, environmental sustainability, valued workforce, animal welfare, and community health and nutrition] are bound together - they are not separate things that you can negotiate. It is one solid piece... It’s essentially an incentive mechanism for the companies that want to sell food to public institutions.”

The most striking example comes from Los Angeles, where in 2012 the local FPC was the first to work with institutions in their region to adopt the Center for Good Food Purchasing standards. The Los Angeles FPC, along with the Los Angeles County School District, helped forge an alliance between workers from across food sectors. The school district is the second largest in the country, only second to New York City, serving over 750,000 meals a day. Not long after the school district signed the good food purchasing agreement, the food distribution workers delivering food for school lunches to the district who were part of the Teamsters union, drew upon this agreement in their negotiations for a new contract. A representative for the Los Angeles FPC explained,

“They [food distribution workers] documented some unfair labor practices, and then went to the school board and the food service director and the Food Policy Council and said, ‘the school district has this policy that they’ve committed to [the Good Food Purchasing Program], and we have some unfair labor practices... the LA Unified distributor is in violation of this policy.’ And so all the different stakeholders got involved... They asked the food policy council to have a conversation with the distributor who had been involved in the development of the good food purchasing policy and give input on it, and their endorsement of it.”

KEY FINDINGS:

In this case, the food delivery drivers utilized this food procurement agreement to successfully address labor violations. They worked through regional labor networks moderated by the FPC and the good food purchasing agreement. This case exemplifies tangible impacts when workers were able to connect at a local scale, seeing themselves as workers within the same food system, from food distribution to food service. The FPC played an important role as a mediator, leveraging their regional influence and relationships to support the food distribution workers. Our findings suggest that when FPCs are empowered to coordinate procurement, they can amplify workers' voices and ensure that public food dollars advance economic justice.

2

Value-based procurement demonstrates that profitability and worker rights can coexist.

A separate finding from our research showed that some FPCs utilized procurement programs to incentivize locally owned and operated businesses to adopt and maintain fair labor practices by emphasizing the positive financial benefits of doing so. For example, the Philadelphia Food Policy Advisory Council discovered that appealing to local business owners' economic interests creates powerful incentives for improving worker conditions. Rather than framing labor standards as additional costs, the Council developed procurement guidelines that help locally owned food businesses access lucrative government contracts by demonstrating their commitment to fair labor practices. The guide is directed at locally and regionally owned food businesses such as processing, transportation, retail, and hospitality, but was designed with workers' needs in mind and with workers' input. In the guide, which they generated to support small food businesses in developing trainings and resources for attracting and retaining workers, they highlight that food work is highly skilled and detailed work, which is crucial to their regional economy. In making the case to business owners to respect workers' rights and needs for a living wage, improved benefits, and working conditions, their approach recognizes that retaining skilled workers reduces turnover costs, improves service quality, strengthens business competitiveness and creates a positive culture for workers that will boost their business's success, which they see as a positive for workers and owners.

In our focus group with Philadelphia FPC representatives, one FPC leader explained their strategy:

"We learned the easy way that if everyone's interests are met, we can meet everybody's interests in the middle. In this case, it was making money and [worker] safety, right? It worked perfectly."

By connecting workforce development with procurement opportunities, the Philadelphia FPC proved that supporting worker welfare can be a sustainable business strategy. Local businesses gained preferential access to city contracts while workers benefited from improved wages, benefits, and working conditions in a model where economic development and labor justice reinforce each other.

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3

The Power of Place: FPCs as regional connectors for labor justice

Food Policy Councils' regional focus gives them unique advantages in addressing labor issues that have hindered broader national movements.⁸ Unlike multinational corporations with shareholders scattered globally, locally owned food businesses have direct stakes in their communities' economic health and face their employees on a personal level.⁹ This geographic advantage becomes particularly powerful when channelled through values-based procurement programs. FPCs capitalize on this by building coalitions around shared interests in regional economic resilience, positioning themselves as mediators who can bring together workers, business owners, labor unions, and government officials around concrete procurement opportunities. As a HEAL Food Alliance representative noted about FPCs' unique positioning in procurement work:

“That procurement work is vast, and it's complex. And food policy councils play a critical role in all of it because they contain the connective tissue between the government folks, the administration folks, and the grassroots groups”.

This connective role becomes particularly powerful when FPCs use procurement programs to seek common ground among diverse regional stakeholders. One of the most effective rally points has been improving place-based economies through values-based purchasing, which has broad appeal among food business owners and workers who are all vested in their local communities. Rather than framing labor standards as abstract policy goals, procurement programs make them concrete business opportunities with real economic incentives. FPCs have discovered they can more effectively organize workers and owners around procurement contracts by rallying around a shared threat: multinational corporations that pose dangers to both local businesses and workers. As one FPC representative from the Oregon Community Food Systems Network explained:

KEY FINDINGS:

“We feel like local policies can mitigate harms by mitigating corporate and private equity ownership and control over our food system. What does it take to bolster local production and local work, and to support local farmers? When you talk to a lot of farmers themselves, they’re worried about being taken over by mega corporations and they’re worried about not being able to survive themselves.”

This shared concern about corporate consolidation makes values-based procurement particularly appealing to local stakeholders who see these programs as tools to strengthen their competitive position against larger corporations. By positioning procurement standards in contrast to corporate consolidation, FPCs can frame labor protections not as additional costs but as competitive advantages that favor local businesses in securing public contracts over exploitative competitors. This procurement-centered approach proves particularly effective because it creates what the HEAL Food Alliance representative called “*unusual bedfellows —coalitions including labor unions, environmental groups, and animal welfare organizations that usually gives legislators and other decision makers pause to argue or to oppose legislation*” when advocating for comprehensive procurement reform.”

By focusing on local procurement, FPCs turn abstract labor rights into concrete economic strategies, ones that benefit both businesses and workers, while resisting extractive corporate models.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:

Making procurement a tool for worker power. Adopt and enforce values-based procurement policies, like the Good Food Purchasing Program (GFPP), across public institution food contracts. These frameworks should include clear labor standards such as fair wages, union rights, and safe working conditions and should be non-negotiable. FPCs should play a formal role in convening and mediating among food workers, unions, businesses, and public agencies to ensure labor provisions are upheld.

Incentivizing local food businesses to center labor justice. Develop procurement-aligned business supports (e.g., guides, trainings, and incentives) that help small and regional food businesses meet labor standards and access government contracts. Frame fair labor practices not as extra burdens but as competitive advantages that reduce turnover and boost service quality.

Leveraging local relationships to build unlikely alliances. Use FPCs’ regional connections to build broad coalitions that unify local businesses, labor unions, environmental advocates, and food workers around procurement goals. Position these coalitions as a bulwark against corporate consolidation, emphasizing that labor protections strengthen, not hinder regional, economic health.

CONCLUSION:

Food Policy Councils unite diverse local stakeholders to advance labor justice through values-based procurement. By championing fair labor standards, empowering small and regional food businesses to compete for public contracts, and fostering broad cross-sector coalitions, FPCs turn procurement policies such as those promoted by the Good Food Purchasing Program, into a powerful tool for improving worker conditions. This strategy not only strengthens regional economies but also counters corporate consolidation and centers equity within food systems. Far beyond simple contracting, procurement becomes a means to advance worker rights and build resilient, just local food economies.

Established in 2018, the Lender Center for Social Justice builds upon Syracuse University's historical commitment to social, cultural, and economic inclusion by strengthening community-engaged research and education partnerships locally, across New York State, nationally, and globally.

SUGGESTED CITATIONS:

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