

Faith Leaders for Food Justice

PRESS RELEASE

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United Food and Commercial Workers Local 1500 Join Forces with Inter-Faith Leaders to Call for a Just and Sustainable Food System for NYC

Christian, Muslim, Jewish, and Buddhist faith leaders locked hands with representatives of the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 1500, We Act for Environmental Justice, and the NYC Coalition Against Hunger on the steps of City Hall to demand changes to food policy at the city and federal level. Their “demands” were in the form of prayers and policy recommendations.

On the City level, faith leaders urged Mayor Bloomberg to include food policy in PlaNYC, an omission that disproportionately affects low-income and minority residents who are more likely to be unable to afford and access healthy food in their communities.

On the federal level, faith leaders called on Congressional leaders to support a strong Reauthorization of the Child Nutrition Act, which Congress will consider this year.

Lisa Sharon Harper, co-chair of Faith Leaders for Environmental Justice, the vigil's sponsor, explained, “Low income black and brown families are sitting in the back of the bus when it comes to food in New York City. They pay up to twice as much for less nutritional value and they are twice as likely to suffer from diabetes as higher income New Yorkers.”

“As faith leaders,” Harper added, “we have a moral mandate to speak up when the very lives of the vulnerable are threatened by the systems that govern us.”

Said Alexandra Yannias, coordinator of Interfaith Voices Against Hunger/Feed the Solution, an initiative of the New York City Coalition Against Hunger, and facilitator of the Faith Leaders' food justice working group: “As more children suffer from hunger, obesity, and diabetes in our communities, we must improve federal legislation for child nutrition to create a healthier generation. We call on Congress to support a strong Reauthorization of the Child Nutrition Act by increasing the per meal reimbursement for school meals to allow the programs to purchase healthier foods and by making the programs universal in low-income neighborhoods.”

Faith Leaders for Environmental Justice, co-chaired by Harper and Charles Calloway of We ACT for Environmental Justice, is a diverse collaboration between faith leaders committed to making deep impact on issues of environmental justice in New York City through coordinated collective action on issues such as food justice, climate justice, and energy conservation.

Faith Leaders for Food Justice

Policy decisions must integrate a just and sustainable food system into the political structure of New York City. Currently, fast food restaurants are subsidized by the city to locate at 125th street or above. Meanwhile, supermarkets are closing in that area and pharmacies are opening in their place to meet the high demands for diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease medication.

Said Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer, “We need a paradigm shift in the way New York thinks about food. One of the most exciting next steps is the idea of a food shed. The goal would not be to get 100 percent of our food from the foodshed but to get as much as possible in order to make locally grown fresh food more available, particularly to under-served communities, and to promote economic development in and around New York.”

A food shed would create a 200-mile zone around New York City that could provide more fresh produce at a cheaper rate by taking advantage of local farms and distributors.

“Job standards are especially important, since underserved areas have the highest rates of poverty and unemployment,” added Allen Strouse, Food Policy Associate for United Food & Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 1500. “Incentives need to guarantee that employers provide good jobs so that programs like FRESH truly benefit working-class New Yorkers. We need supermarkets that bring good food, good jobs, and good health.”

The United Food and Commercial Workers Local 1500, which serves the interests of 22,000 members, will participate in the vigil.

The day of justice continued that evening at New York Faith and Justice’s event, *An Offering of Letters for Food Justice*. Hosted by St. Mary’s Episcopal Church at 521 W. 126th St at 7 pm, participants will share stories of food injustice and its effects in our city and our schools. They will write letters to Mayor Bloomberg and congressional representatives calling for food to be adopted as part of PlanNYC and for the passage of the Child Reauthorization Act.

Said Yannias, “We cannot continue to stand by as low-income communities in New York City suffer from hunger and diet-related diseases. We must take action now by calling on our representatives on the federal and city levels to improve how we feed our children and our communities.”

Lisa Sharon Harper, who is also executive director of New York Faith & Justice, reflected, “For those who have much, food seems like an insignificant side issue. For those who have little, food is the difference between life and death, health or debt.”

“We must redistribute the health in New York City,” Harper added, “and we must do it now.”

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