Food is a powerful storyteller. Our diet signals whether we cook at home, shop locally, prefer inexpensive dishes, or even think about what we eat. But the consumer side of mealtime is just one of food's many plot lines. Food has backstories, too, none more unsavory than this one: agricultural workers – the people who make dinner possible – are also the most likely to go to bed hungry.

Every day, some 1.1 billion people – one-third of the global workforce – go to work at the world's farms. And, every night, many of them return home – having suffered countless violations of their human rights – without enough money to feed themselves or their families.

Farm work is one of the only professions in which national legal protections are regularly ignored. Minimum wage standards endorsed by the International Labor Organization (ILO), and adopted by many industries around the world, remain either unenforced in the agriculture sector or do not extend to informal farm workers. But, because migrant labor makes up the bulk of the agricultural workforce, this gap in coverage has become a canyon.

In rural parts of developing countries, 80% of farm workers earn less than $1.25 per day, trapping them in poverty. Additionally, piece-rate pay schemes force workers to spend hours in extreme weather to meet demanding quotas.

Worst of all, those working on unethical farms do so at high risk. According to the ILO, dangerous machinery, long working hours, and exposure to toxic pesticides makes farm work one of the world's deadliest jobs; more than 170,000 agricultural workers are killed every year on unsafe farms, twice the mortality rate of any other industry.

And yet, agricultural work is typically excluded from occupational health and safety rules in most countries. Even in the United States, there is no federal law mandating that employers give farm workers breaks for water and shade, even though heatstroke remains a leading cause of work-related farm deaths in the US.

The recent death of Fabián Tomasi, an Argentine farm worker and critic of the agrochemical industry in his country, was a reminder of the hazards of industrialized agriculture. While companies like Monsanto argue that pesticides are necessary to ensure food security, the consequences of chemical exposure to workers like Tomasi – whose body was left twisted and mangled after years of handling chemicals without protection – reveal the human cost of their use. Even in

developed countries, acute pesticide poisoning affects one in every 5,000 agricultural workers, and countless more employees are exposed to toxins on a daily basis.

Unfortunately, few agricultural workers are in a position to advocate for their rights. Seasonal and rural workers lack access to collective bargaining, and undocumented migrant workers avoid unions for fear that employers will retaliate by calling the immigration authorities. Moreover, basic benefits such as social security, health care, and workers' compensation are typically nonexistent. Exempt from much workplace regulation, this is an industry that can afford to put cost-savings and profits above the wellbeing of employees.

It is time for us to stop passively sticking a fork into what lands on our plates, and use our purchasing power to resist paying the cheapest price for food. Holding people accountable for mistreating farm workers will be challenging, but not impossible. We can begin by calling on governments to spend more time protecting farm workers than investigating their immigration status.

Of course, for this to be possible, we need more information about where our food comes from. Nowadays, we tend to rely on informational labels and certifications to tell us that. But the story they tell is fragmented, incomplete, and at times even misleading. We need to take the extra steps to learn the full story. This means moving beyond voluntary labels declaring that food is produced fairly and humanely to demand mandatory labels that expose non-compliance with these norms.

Worldwide, some 821 million people are undernourished – a figure that continues to increase. This is a tragedy; no one anywhere should have their rights, including the right to food, violated; yet that is exactly what so many farm workers and food-chain workers endure every day.

Fighting for their rights has always been difficult, but if we continue the battle, the story of the global food system may lose some of its bitterness.

You can learn more about the work of the Special Rapporteur, and access her official report on agricultural workers and the right to food at Hilalelver.org. You can also follow the Special Rapporteur on Twitter @HilalElver.

Hilal Elver is United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food. Melissa Shapiro is a consultant to the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, and a former attorney-adviser with the US Environmental Protection Agency.

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