

Food Justice and Worker Organization: An Interview with Luigi Rinaldi, Industrial Workers of the World

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Q: First off, thanks so much for taking the time to do this interview, Luigi. This issue of *Theory in Action* is centered on food justice and sustainability. For a lot of people, food justice cannot be coherently separated from the experiences of workers in the food industry and, I think, if we mean the term “sustainability” in its most widely applicable way, that also means looking at how people’s lives and livelihoods are made unsustainable by our dominant institutions. I know your union, the Industrial Workers of the World, over the last few years has had various campaigns in food service. Can you start by briefly outlining the economic situation of workers in the food industry? Why should people be concerned with the plight of food industry workers?

Luigi Rinaldi (LR) : Thank *you* for the opportunity to talk about these issues! I would say that it is impossible to talk about food justice without touching on capitalism and, therefore, the class relation. Workers in the food industry, throughout the whole process – from farm to restaurant – are in a situation that leaves them extremely precarious. Now, I’m primarily going to focus on the food service end of things, because that’s the part of the industry I’ve worked in, but there’s a lot to be said for the production side and the supply chain as well. The work isn’t the same, but the conditions that it creates are similar.

What you have is a very precarious and low wage industry. You can expect to hold a job for less than a year and to earn less than ten dollars an hour. My previous workplace, a café and bakery, had about 90% turnover in a year... I would say that is low for most of the industry, especially when you get into fast food. Contrary to the popular image, most of these workers are not teenagers, but adults trying to eke out a living. They are fathers and mothers who often have to work two or three jobs, because in the food industry full time employment is rare, and even