


RAISE SOUTH FLORIDA



*Inside stories from hospitality workers
fighting for a raise*



Last year, HUD Secretary Marcia Fudge called Miami the “**epicenter of the housing crisis** in this country.”¹ A family earning median income in Miami and paying median rent would have to spend 42.3% of their income on rent – the worst rent share in the nation.² Yet at the same time, South Florida’s **economic engine is roaring**. Miami is a national tourism hub, and **visitor spending is even higher than pre-pandemic**.³ Miami has consistently had one of the lowest unemployment rates of any large city in the country throughout 2023.⁴

This report will make the case for an **immediate \$20 minimum wage** and show through real workers’ stories how a \$20 wage makes the difference between intolerable choices and an adequate standard of living.

From February through April 2023, UNITE HERE Local 355 conducted a survey of over 900 tourism and hospitality workers who work in jobs that are paid hourly wages.⁵ The results give a snapshot of some hospitality workers across South Florida.

The survey responses show that **inadequate wages** are leaving workers with **unstable housing options**, making **unacceptable sacrifices** to put food on the table, and with **limited time** to care for their families and communities.

We also highlight a key case study of workers who are left behind that standard: the LSG Sky Chefs employees who prepare in-flight food served on airplanes travelling through Miami International Airport, most commonly for American Airlines. They work alongside thousands of airport workers who struggle but are on a path to \$20 – but at Sky Chefs, workers have no path to \$20. This report will trace the stories of two Sky Chefs workers and show what their inadequate wages mean for their lives.

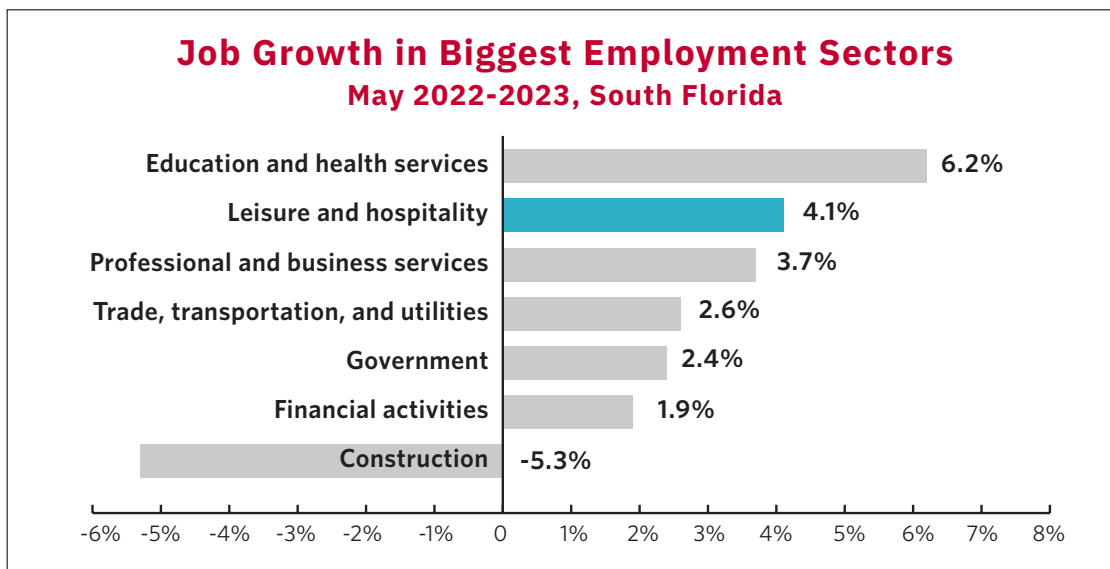
It’s time to **Raise South Florida**. Hospitality workers need a raise — and when they get what they need, it will raise up all of South Florida.

They work alongside thousands of airport workers who are on a path to \$20 – but at Sky Chefs, workers have no path to \$20.

Who are hospitality workers?

This survey includes results from over 900 hospitality & tourism workers at casinos, hotels, stadiums, and airports represented by Unite Here Local 355. The respondents include housekeepers, maintenance workers, bartenders, casino cashiers, airport cashiers, bellmen, dishwashers, banquet servers, cocktail servers, doormen, food runners, housemen, cooks, and slot attendants.

Their work is at the heart of South Florida’s economy: leisure & hospitality is **one of the largest and fastest-growing job sectors** in the Miami metro area.⁶



BLS data, percent change in number of jobs from May 2022-May 2023, for all nonfarm employment sectors with over 100,000 jobs, Miami-Fort Lauderdale-West Palm Beach, FL Metropolitan Statistical Area.

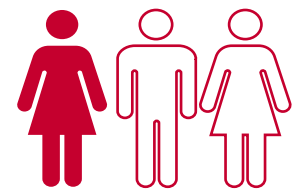


“iHola!, my name is Maria Sanchez and I’ve worked at Sky Chefs at the Miami International Airport as a food plater for 10 years. I was born and raised in Havana, Cuba, and I moved to Miami 22 years ago as a single mom to give my daughter a better life. I’ll tell you what my life has been like in this report.”



“Saludos! I’m Sonia Toledo and I’ve worked at Sky Chefs in the Assembly department for 31 years. I moved to Miami in 1991 from the Dominican Republic when I was 26 years old. My dad was a sugarcane farmer, when he was diagnosed with cancer, I came to Miami to find work so I could send money back for his treatment. I arrived in Miami on May 13 and a week later I started working in Sky Chefs. I earned \$5.65 an hour and now, in 2023, I’m earning \$15.35. You’ll hear more about my story in this report.

The hospitality workers who responded to our survey are **overwhelmingly immigrants**, primarily from Cuba, Haiti, and countries across Latin America. They are also **overwhelmingly renters**: Over 85% of survey respondents say they pay rent. And they are **economically precarious**: Two out of three workers who responded said that they have less than five hundred dollars available to cover an emergency. Nearly one out of three said that they work a second job to pay their bills.



1 in 3 works a second job

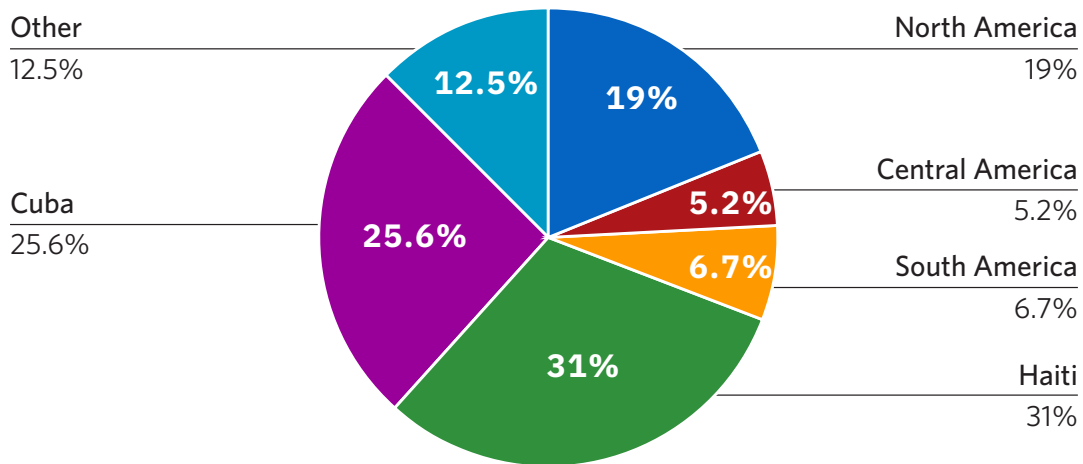
“In October my rent went up \$900! Now, I pay \$2,700 a month. My expenses cost more than what I’m making. My husband retired in December and I’m the only one working in my household.

We’ve been saving up for years with the plan to buy a house when my husband retired and provide a stable home for my grandson, Adonnys. But now I’m left scrambling to get money to pay rent. I’m 61 years old and my husband is 74. We thought we would be settling down soon, but now it feels like we need to start over.

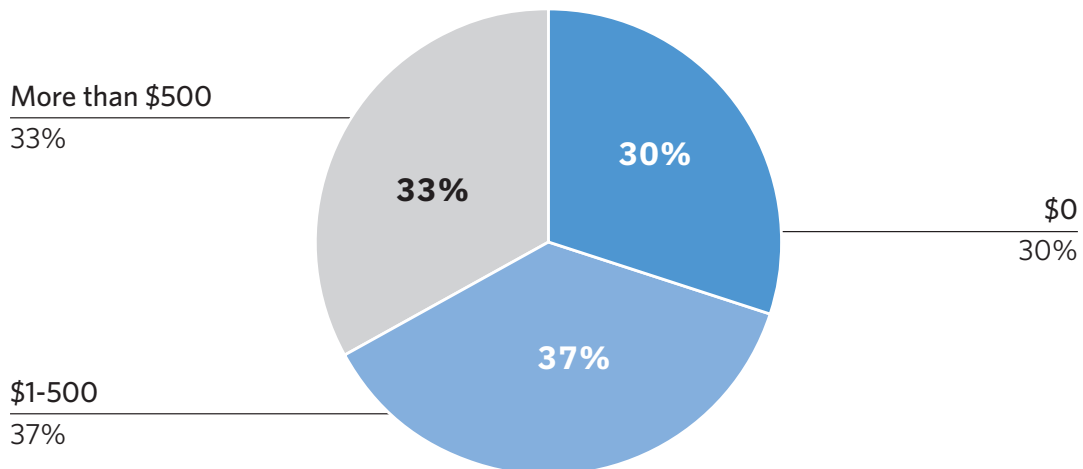


—Maria Sanchez

Where are hospitality workers from?



How much money do hospitality workers have in their savings in case of an emergency?



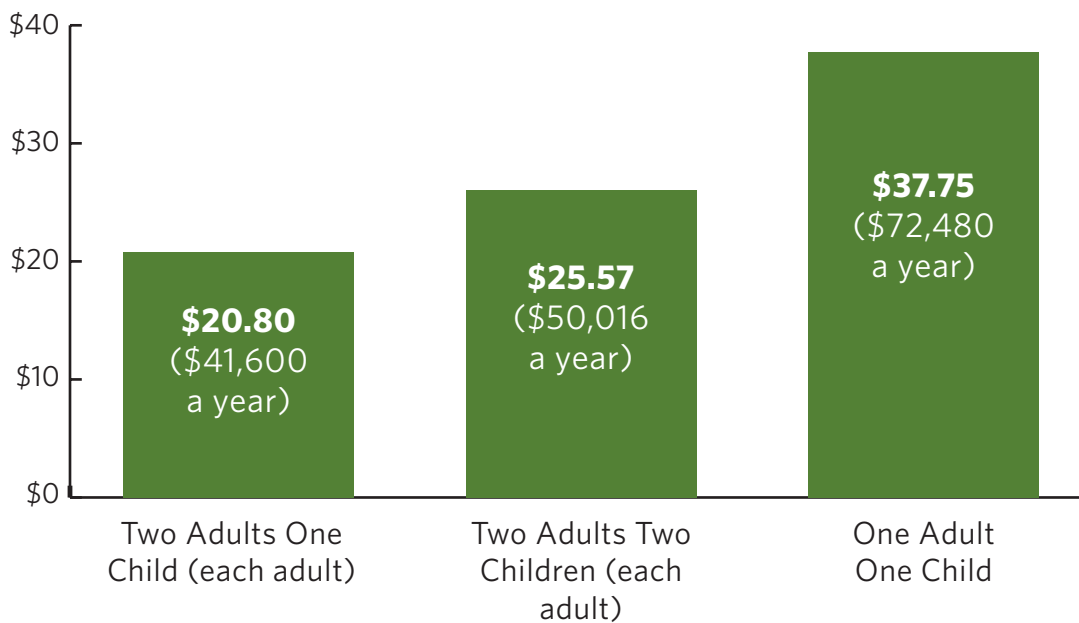
“ I met my soulmate while working at Sky Chefs. My coworker introduced me to her son and in 1995 we got married. We had a beautiful life together, but in May 2023, I got home from work, and I found my husband dead. I didn't have any savings. I spent all the money I had on his funeral, and I had to take out a loan for my other expenses. —Sonia Toledo

Hospitality workers can't afford South Florida

The tourism industry in South Florida has more than recovered since the pandemic crash. But the residents whose labor fueled that recovery are still struggling.

The current cost of living in South Florida makes \$20 the bare minimum a family needs to survive. According to the MIT Living Wage calculator, two adults with a \$20.80 wage each can just barely support a family of three in the Miami-Fort Lauderdale metro area, with both adults working full time.⁷ For two parents with two children, the living wage goes up to \$26.05; for a single parent with one child, it reaches \$37.75.

Minimum Living Wage to cover “basic needs” Miami – Fort Lauderdale area, MIT



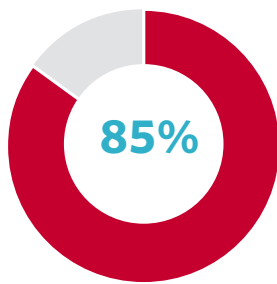
For the many families whose breadwinners do not make a living wage, the cost of living has careened out of control in the past three years.

South Florida's housing crisis has been widely recognized, locally and nationally. Miami ranked first in Newsweek's "The 25 Least Affordable Places to Rent in the U.S."⁸ **Mayor Daniella Levine Cava declared an affordability crisis in Miami-Dade County in 2022 because of the skyrocketing housing costs.**⁹ HUD Secretary Marcia Fudge called Miami the "epicenter of the housing crisis in this country."¹⁰

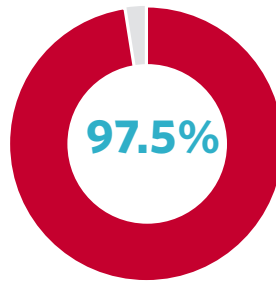
The crisis is not over: at least one housing market expert from Florida International University predicts that **rental prices will not decrease in 2023.**¹¹

The pandemic's impact on hospitality workers was severe. A study from the Economic Policy Institute concluded that "the pandemic recession is unusual in how focused its job losses were on low-wage workers." It also revealed that "within leisure and hospitality, Black and Hispanic women were disproportionately impacted" and "within the worst-hit sectors, workers in the lowest average wage and lowest average hour occupations were hit the worst and remain most damaged."¹² The subsequent rent and inflation problems continue to harm those who faced the worst job losses and gaps in income.

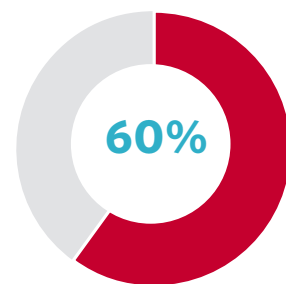
The impact of this broad crisis on the workers who responded to UNITE HERE Local 355's survey are devastating.



85% pay rent



97.5% of those had a rent increase in 2023



60% had a rent increase of at least \$300 in 2023



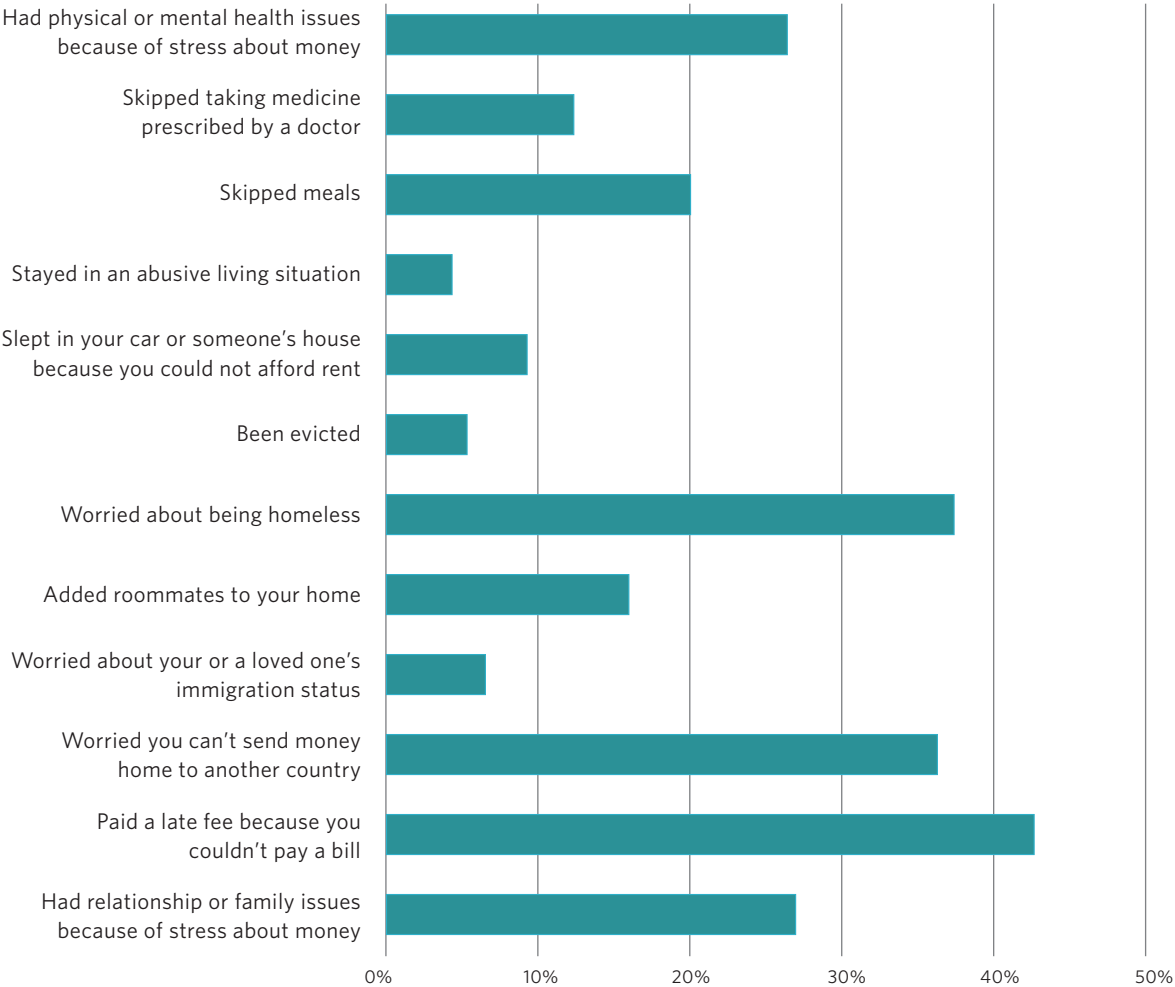
Having spent all my money putting my husband to rest, it's extra hard to keep up with the cost of living in Miami. Groceries are expensive. Chicken, eggs, milk are all more expensive. We need to raise the standard of airport workers here in South Florida.

—Sonia Toledo

The cost-of-living crisis doesn't end with housing. According to the Consumer Price Index, area prices for May in South Florida are up 9.9 percent over the past year, and in the past six months South Florida has intermittently held the top rank for **highest price increases in the country**.¹³

This crisis forced hospitality workers who responded to the survey and their families to make intolerable choices.

Difficulties Experienced in the Past Year



Case Study:

Miami International Airport, American Airlines, and LSG Sky Chefs workers

Miami International Airport identifies itself as a “leading economic engine of Miami-Dade County and for the state of Florida.”¹⁴ Yet among one group of its essential workers, **more than 50% did not have enough money for rent in the last year.**

LSG Sky Chefs is an airline catering company that provides food for airlines at Miami International Airport. By far its largest client is American Airlines: though it was later sold, Sky Chefs was originally founded in Texas by American Airlines¹⁵; today, American accounts for 60% of all passengers travelling through MIA, which is the airline’s largest international hub.¹⁶ The airport reports an annual business revenue of \$31.9 billion¹⁷, and **two thirds of the food and drink on board its flights is prepared by airline catering workers at Sky Chefs.**¹⁸



“ I spend all day in a freezer carrying food trays and preparing plates with meals that go on flights at MIA. I spend over 8 hours on my feet. I only sit 30 minutes for my lunch break. I need to plan ahead and make sure the food goes out on time, so flights aren’t delayed. It’s a lot of pressure. —*Maria Sanchez* ”



“ I work hard to provide food for American Airline passengers traveling through MIA by loading soda, water, juice, and supplies into the carts that go on the flights. I need to wear compression socks every day to work to withstand the long hours standing. I take ibuprofen almost every day to get through work, sometimes, I take 2 or 3. I feel pain in my whole body especially in my arms, legs, and knees. —*Sonia Toledo* ”

Miami Dade County established a living wage requirement for employees on County service contracts to “allow citizens to support themselves and their families above the poverty line and with dignity.”¹⁹ But Sky Chefs has fought for years to exclude their employees from the living wage requirement and continues to pay wages far below that of other MIA employees covered by the Living Wage. Decades after the County passed the requirement, Miami International Airport’s airline catering workers are still not covered by the living wage requirement.

Almost 75% of Sky Chefs workers at MIA make less than \$18 an hour.



Some Sky Chefs workers make **as little as \$14 an hour** as a result — which amounts to a **yearly income of just \$29,120** for a full-time employee, working at the county’s so-called “economic engine”.²⁰

88% of SkyChefs workers – nearly 9 out of 10 – do not have health insurance through their company health care plan.



Source²¹

I have high blood pressure and hypertension that I take daily medicine for. I can’t afford health insurance from Sky Chefs, it’s \$67 weekly. I have public health insurance, but it leaves me with high copay costs. Throughout the years I’ve needed to get operations for blood circulation. In 2020, my veins were clogged, and I had to get a cardiac catheterization operation. Even with my health insurance I had to pay over \$2,000 out of pocket.

—Sonia Toledo



The Miami International Airport is operated by the Miami-Dade Aviation Department and property of Miami-Dade County government.²² Constituents effectively own the airport; the airport should be a place that empowers, not exploits, workers of Miami-Dade County.

That’s the purported motivation of the County’s Living Wage Ordinance: one related county resolution argued that “**sub-poverty level wages do not serve the public purpose** because such wages place an undue burden on taxpayers and the community to **subsidize employers** paying inadequate wages by providing their employees social services.”²³ That policy covers workers in jobs that keep MIA operating from the ticket counters to terminal concessions stands, from security to janitorial to cargo handling – but not airline catering workers.²⁴

Out of 837 LSG Sky Chefs workers at MIA, 174 responded to the Local 355 survey.

23% of SkyChefs workers who responded to the survey – or more than 1 out of every 5 workers – said that they needed public assistance in the past year, including food stamps (SNAP), taxpayer-funded healthcare (CHIP or Medicaid), Section 8 housing, or utilities or rent assistance.

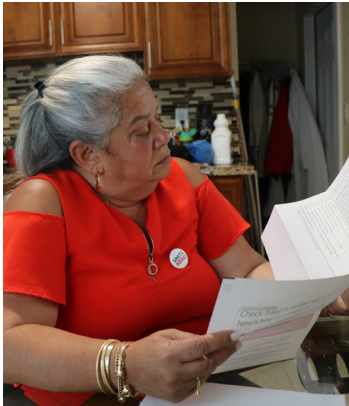
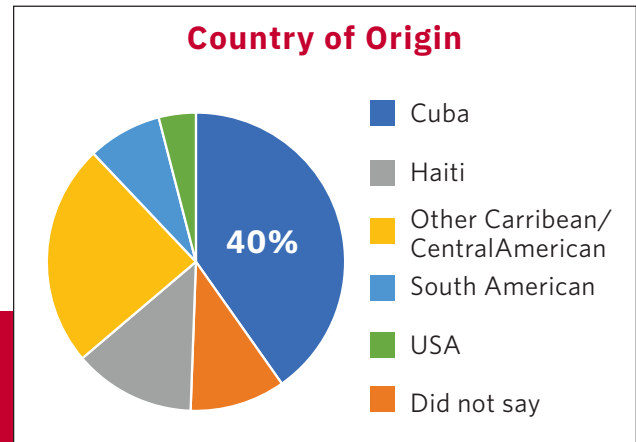
23% needed public assistance



	Levy Concessions at Marlins’ Stadium	MIA Hotel at MIA Airport	Sky Chefs at MIA Airport
Miami-Dade County role	Owens stadium, funded stadium for economic growth	Owens airport, has contract with Host	Owens airport, provides permit and collects fees from Sky Chefs
Minimum wage today	\$20	\$20	\$14
Annual income at min. wage (40 hrs/week, 52 weeks)	\$41,600	\$41,600	\$29,120
% of workers making less than county living wage (\$20.34 if health care is not included) ²⁵	0%	0%	79%

Sky Chefs: Disproportionately Cuban

Cuban workers are the largest group among Sky Chefs workers at MIA who responded to the survey, making this low-wage workforce disproportionately Cuban compared to other workers surveyed.



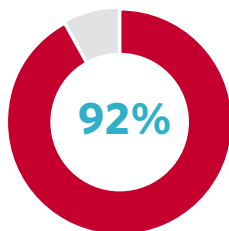
“When I left Havana, I dreamed of having a good stable job that allowed me to pay my bills and save up to buy a house. My American Dream turned into a nightmare. I haven’t been able to buy a house or pay all my bills with my hourly wage of \$16.10.”

—Maria Sanchez

Miami-Dade County and Mayor Daniella Levine Cava have championed the cause of renters. When Mayor Levine Cava declared an affordability crisis in 2022, citing a 30% increase in local rents, she announced initiatives to spend federal funding on rent relief, convene city mayors to discuss housing, and incentivize affordable housing, and the county soon passed a Tenant’s Bill of Rights.²⁶

But for Sky Chefs workers, **these county projects offer little hope for solving their housing problems when their wages are behind the living wage.**

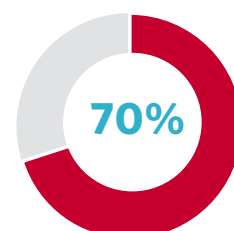
The survey results underscore the problem. Among Sky Chefs at MIA workers:



92% are renters



Over 50% did not have enough money for rent at some time in the last year



70% worried about being homeless at some time in the last year

Conclusion

Workers in South Florida are drowning and need immediate relief. The tourism industry in South Florida has more than recovered since the pandemic crash. But meanwhile, the residents whose labor fueled that recovery are left behind.

The current cost of living in South Florida makes **\$20 the bare minimum** a family needs to survive. According to the MIT Living Wage calculator, two adults with a \$20.80 wage each can cover basic needs for a family of three in the Miami-Fort Lauderdale metro area, with both adults working full time.

A \$20 minimum wage standard has begun to ripple throughout the tourism industry. In the last year, housekeepers and cooks won a \$20 minimum wage through UNITE HERE Local 355 union contracts at the Fontainebleau and Diplomat hotels, then Levy food service workers at the Marlins' stadium did the same this year in May. UNITE HERE members who work at the MIA Hotel, HMSHost, MCA, and Areas won fair contracts last year that included wages above the County's living wage, free health insurance, and meal vouchers. In October this year, the county living wage - which covers most workers at the airport, but not Sky Chefs workers - will increase to \$20.34.²⁷

One worker in the kitchen at the Marlins' stadium who went from \$15.30 to \$20 overnight spoke about the difference that raise made. Before the raise, Dorothisa Hamilton had worked two jobs and skipped medication, but after winning the \$20 minimum she said: "This is a sigh of relief. Just last month my rent went up \$500. I'll use this raise to pay my rent and for my insulin medication."

But the \$20 wage must spread far further if South Florida workers are to stay afloat.

Now, Sky Chefs airline catering workers are in contract bargaining with their employer. In the heart of Miami-Dade County's crown jewel airport, surrounded by workers who have a right to a living wage, they are being left behind. Their fight for a \$20 minimum is the next test for South Florida: can the County's core economic drivers deliver on the wages workers need?

The time to Raise South Florida is now.



“ I’m standing strong with my union to fight so all airport workers can get a raise. We need to raise the standard of airport workers here in South Florida. —Maria Sanchez

Endnotes

- 1 <https://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/community/miami-dade/article262956308.html>
- 2 <https://www.realtor.com/research/february-2023-rent/>
- 3 Greater Miami & Miami Beach 2021 Visitor Industry Overview
- 4 <https://www.cbsnews.com/miami/news/four-of-the-five-us-metro-areas-with-lowest-unemployment-are-in-florida/>, <https://www.bls.gov/web/metro/lalrgma.htm>
- 5 Survey included 906 responses from South Florida workers at 20 union-represented employers including hotels (Diplomat Hotel, Fontainebleau Hotel, Hyatt Hotel, and St Regis Hotel), food service concessions at MIA and FLL airports (Areas USA, Compass Group, DNC, HMS Host at FLL and at MIA, Hudson at FLL and at MIA, Master ConcessionAir, and Paradies), casinos (Calder Casino, Gulfstream Casino, Isle Casino, Magic City Casino), Marlins Stadium, and in-flight catering (Sky Chefs and Gate Gourmet at MIA).
- 6 https://www.bls.gov/regions/southeast/news-release/areaemployment_miami.htm
- 7 “MIT Living Wage Calculation for Miami-Fort Lauderdale-West Palm Beach, FL,” accessed on May 31, 2023. <https://livingwage.mit.edu/metros/33100>
- 8 <https://www.newsweek.com/25-least-affordable-places-rent-us-1579614>
- 9 <https://www.miamidade.gov/releases/2022-04-08-mayor-housing-crisis.asp>
- 10 <https://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/community/miami-dade/article262956308.html>
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- 15 <https://www.lsg-group.com/lsg-sky-chefs/>
- 16 https://www.miami-airport.com/annual_report.asp
- 17 https://www.miami-airport.com/about_us.asp
- 18 Opportunity fee invoices from MIA records, May 2022-April 2023.
- 19 <https://www.miamidade.gov/global/business/smallbusiness/living-wage.page>
- 20 Wage data analysis from Unite Here Local 355 bargaining unit list. Latest wage data available as of July 2023.
- 21 Local 355 employer data, as of June 2023.
- 22 https://www.miami-airport.com/about_us.asp
- 23 <https://www.miamidade.gov/govaction/legistarfiles/Matters/Y2022/221770.pdf>
- 24 County Code Section 2-8.9f(2)(c), https://library.municode.com/fl/miami_-_dade_county/codes/code_of_ordinances?nodid=PTIIIICOR_CH2AD_ARTIINGE_S2-8.9LIWAORCOSECOCOEM#
- 25 Wage data analysis from Unite Here Local 355 bargaining unit lists. Latest wage data available as of July 2023.
- 26 <https://www.miamidade.gov/releases/2022-04-08-mayor-housing-crisis.asp>, https://www.miamidade.gov/global/service.page?Mduid_service=ser1652192015243613
- 27 <https://www.miamidade.gov/smallbusiness/library/reports/2023-2024-living-wage.pdf>



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