

BRIGITTE GYNTHNER

# A Call to Farm Worker Justice

## Ending Worker Abuse by Consumer Action

**M**igrant farm workers are some of the nation's poorest and most exploited workers. In addition to poverty wages and rampant abuses, Florida farm workers also have to contend with the possibility of forced labor and human trafficking. Since 1997, the U.S. Department of Justice has prosecuted seven modern-day slavery rings in Florida agriculture. And those are just the tip of the iceberg: numerous cases go unreported and are never prosecuted. The Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW), a community-based farm worker organization, was started by farm workers who began meeting at Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church in 1993 to address the abuses they faced in the fields. The CIW has been at the forefront of investigating, uncovering, and aiding the Department of Justice in the prosecution of numerous modern-day slavery cases, resulting in freedom for over 1,000 workers.

In December 2008, two Florida farm bosses were sentenced to 12 years each in federal prison for beating, threatening, restraining, and locking farm workers in trucks. The enslaved farm workers were locked in the back of produce trucks at night without a bathroom or mattresses; the men slept on cardboard tomato boxes. When they wanted to shower, they were given a garden house and a tomato bucket and each shower was a \$5 deduction from their paycheck. They were charged similarly for food and other costs, leaving them with next to nothing when it was payday despite working daily in the fields. They were brutally mistreated if they tried to leave or didn't want to work – even tied to a pole, chained, and beaten.

The problem of forced labor in Florida agriculture is not just a bad apple here or there, but a continual succession of cases that go right to the heart of the agribusiness industry. The enslaved farm workers in the case described above picked tomatoes on two of Florida's major tomato farms, Six L's and Pacific. At the time of the slavery operation, executives of Six L's and Pacific were the president and vice president of the Florida Tomato Growers Exchange.

These slavery cases do not occur in a vacuum but are the result of the general lack of rights and climate of abuse that farm workers face on a daily basis in Florida agribusiness. This is plantation style agribusiness in which a handful of growers control the industry, each owning thousands of acres in Florida as well as up and down the East Coast. Wages have not changed significantly in three decades;



Photo by Scott Robertson

tomato pickers today earn just 40-50 cents per 32-lb bucket of tomatoes that they pick and haul. Wage theft, verbal abuse, sexual harassment, and unsafe exposure to pesticides are routine and farm workers are often employed on a day-labor basis. If you file a complaint, there's a good chance you simply won't be picked for work the next day.

While addressing case after case of wage theft, mistreatment, and forced labor, the farm workers of the CIW also turned their attention to the root causes of worker poverty and abuse. The consolidation of huge retail food corporations in the fast-food, foodservice, and supermarket industries has enabled them to use their large volume purchasing to demand cheaper and cheaper tomatoes. How can the tomato industry produce such artificially cheap tomatoes? Through consolidation and keeping labor costs low – so low that tomato pickers have not had a significant increase since 1978. As a result, any effort to truly end the poverty and abuse faced by Florida tomato pickers must involve the retail food companies that are substantially profiting from their labor and are the ones that have the power and the money to reverse the decades of degradation and abuse.

The good news is that by working together – farm workers, consumers, retailers, and growers – we are forging a solution

to end poverty and abuses in Florida's tomato fields. The CIW, together with Catholics and people of goodwill across the country, have successfully called on Yum Brands (owner of Taco Bell, Pizza Hut, KFC), McDonald's, Burger King, Subway, Whole Foods, Bon Appetit, Compass Group, and Aramark to reach groundbreaking agreements to:

1. Directly improve tomato pickers' wages by a net penny per pound, resulting in a 64-77% increase in farmworkers wages;
2. Enforce a code of conduct against abuses in the fields, including zero tolerance for forced labor; and
3. Ensure a voice for farmworkers in monitoring these improvements, including the ability to report abuses without fear of retaliation.

These "fair food agreements" are the result of a sustained partnership between farm workers and people of faith. Catholics across the country have written letters, hosted farm workers for Truth Tours, and participated in marches, public actions, and vigils. Bishop Frank Dewane of the Diocese of Venice and his predecessor, Bishop Emeritus John Nevins, wrote letters to these companies encouraging them to ensure dignity for farm workers. The Adrian Dominican Sisters and the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary filed shareholder resolutions and provided proxies for farm workers to speak at shareholder meetings. The witness by the faith community – in partnership with the CIW's campaign – was instrumental in leading major retail food companies to agree to improve wages and conditions for tomato pickers.

As a result, three Florida tomato growers are now working with the CIW to implement the fair food agreements. Though this season's historic freeze has posed tremendous challenges (picking came to a virtual halt for nearly three months in Florida tomato fields), farm workers on the three participating farms are now receiving the penny-per-pound raise. A grievance process is in place, where workers are informed of their rights; complaints are investigated with clearly defined consequences if violations are found. Verite, an internationally respected third party monitor, has begun the process of farm visits, worker interviews, audits, and consultation with CIW and participating growers. The goal is to develop benchmarks and monitoring protocols for the new standards, including the establishment of worker health and safety committees that give farm workers a real voice in protecting their rights when pesticides, lightning, or heat threaten their safety in the fields. Implementation of far-reaching change takes time, but we can celebrate that this season, for the first time ever, farm workers and three tomato growers are working together to improve wages and working conditions.

Furthermore, the zero tolerance for forced labor provision of the CIW's agreements with retail food companies means that for the first time ever tomato growers that used enslaved workers are losing business. Companies are shifting their business away from growers tainted by slavery in favor of tomato growers willing to comply with the code of conduct. This market-based approach rewards growers who do the right thing and sends a strong message to others that slavery rings will not be tolerated.

Nevertheless, this is just the beginning. The rest of the tomato industry continues to resist adopting these changes and the supermarket industry, with the notable exception of Whole Foods, has yet to join in the fair food agreements. The CIW's struggle continues onward and we all have an important role to play. As Catholics and as consumers, we can call on the supermarkets where we shop to ensure basic justice for the farm workers who pick their tomatoes.



Photo by Scott Robinson

## SUPERMARKETS: CALL TO ACTION

Currently, the CIW is focused on three major supermarkets that purchase Florida tomatoes: Kroger, Ahold, and Publix.

Kroger is the nation's second largest supermarket company after Wal-Mart and owns numerous regional chains throughout the country including Ralph's, King Soopers, Food 4 Less, Fry's, Dillons, City Market, Fred Meyer, Smith's, Foods Co., Hilander, Jay C, Pay Less, Owen's, Scott's, Gerbes, and QFC. Ahold is a Netherlands-based company that owns Stop & Shop, Giant, Martin's and Ukrop's in the United States. Publix is a Florida-based supermarket and one of the country's ten largest private corporations. All three have failed to respond to the invitation to ensure fair wages and conditions for the farm workers who pick their tomatoes. Instead, Ahold and Publix both purchased tomatoes from farms tainted by the most recent slavery case, in which workers were locked in trucks, chained, and beaten.



Just as Catholics across the country joined their voices with those of farm workers to call on the fast-food industry to embrace justice for tomato pickers, so too can we call on the supermarket industry to do the same. It is opportunity for us to live out our faith, to participate in shaping our

food system to treat farm workers with the dignity and respect they deserve as our brothers and sisters in Christ. We are connected to farm workers because they toil day after day to pick the food that nourishes and sustains us. When we join our voices together we can effectively create change and God calls us to do no less.



Photo courtesy of Interfaith Action for Southwest Florida

Our Catholic faith teaches us that each person is made in the image and likeness of God and thus has innate dignity. Part of honoring the dignity of farm workers is listening to their voice, their call for justice and standing with them. The Church stood with the farm workers even when the fast-food companies resisted making changes, prayerfully and faithfully calling them to come to the table. The changes that are beginning to occur in the Florida tomato industry have the potential to transform decades of degradation and abuse into a future of dignity and justice. We invite you to join us in making that happen. ■



*Brigitte Gynther is a coordinator and national organizer for Interfaith Action for Southwest Florida, a network of people of faith and religious institutions that works in partnership with the Coalition of Immokalee Workers. For more information, visit [www.interfaithact.org](http://www.interfaithact.org) and [www.ciw-online.org](http://www.ciw-online.org)*

## THE CHURCH IN SOUTHWEST FLORIDA

# Farm Worker Justice as a Matter of Faith

The Diocese of Venice in Florida celebrated its 25th Anniversary in 2009. From its very inception in 1984, the spiritual and temporal needs of seasonal and migrant workers were of high priority to its first Ordinary, Bishop John J. Nevins, now Bishop Emeritus. His successor, Most Reverend Frank J. Dewane, has sustained and furthered this concern. Recently, he announced the construction of new church facilities for Jesus Obrero Mission, with many of its Latino parishioners working in the fields.

Through the efforts of several parishes and Catholic Charities, thousands of undocumented individuals and families were registered in 1985 during the amnesty period declared by President Reagan. Immigration Services of the social agency continues into this century, annually assisting with the reunification of over 3000 families through the maze of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) rules and regulations.

Throughout the eastern corridor of this Southwest Florida ten-county Diocese of Venice, a string of parishes and missions are present from its very southern tip in Immokalee to the northern section of Highlands County, the rural lands of Florida's agricultural industry.

It is estimated that 80,000 to 100,000 migrant workers harvest the various food items which are placed on our dinner tables.

Through the Peace and Justice Office, parishes and other Church resources, the diocese has given support to the grassroots entity known as the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW). Parishes provided meals and overnight accommodations during CIW's 230-mile "March for Human Dignity." Catholic parishes joined other major denominations in sending thousands of letters and petitions to the CEOs of Taco Bell, McDonald's, Burger King, and now Publix, the major super-grocery chain of Florida.

The Catholic Church has consistently taught that workers have the right to organize, receive just wages, and work in humane conditions. Catholics in the Diocese of Venice strongly believe that their social justice action on behalf of farm workers is most consistent with their faith.

**Neil D. Michaud, MSW, KSG**  
**Director, Peace and Justice Office**  
**Diocese of Venice in Florida**