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Harvest of Hope: People of faith partnering with farmworkers for fair food

Immokalee is a small town in Florida, a combination of expansive blue sky and small *tiendas* that sell fresh corn tortillas by the kilo. During the harvest, nearly fourteen thousand migrant workers live in trailers crammed with eight, even ten people. Most workers pick tomatoes in fields hidden by tall tress and swamps behind the highway for a piece rate that remains stagnant since 1978. On the shoulders of America's farmworkers are the exorbitant profits of companies in the fast food industry and food market. Despite their vulnerability in the economic hierarchy, farmworkers are not powerless. Ten years ago, a crew leader beat a 16-year-old boy for taking a water break while working. Hundreds of workers peacefully marched in the streets to protest the gruesome act, which now rarely occurs because of the show of solidarity. From that gathering blossomed the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW), a farmworker community group dedicated to ensuring human rights and economic justice for Florida's agricultural laborers. Today, the CIW counts over 3,000 members, joined by thousands of people from diverse faith backgrounds speaking out on issues of economic burden and extreme poverty impressed on agricultural laborers by wealthy institutions such as fast food chains. Interfaith Action of Southwest Florida, a partner organization of the CIW, organizes faith communities across the country who believe in the inherent, God-given dignity and worth of all human beings and whose members are moved to work in partnership with the CIW and support its campaigns. Today, people of faith are uniting with farmworkers to confront the retail food industry with the reality of suppressed farmworker wages, poor living conditions and mistreatment in the fields. The CIW and faith community are on a move to change America's fast food into fair food.

In its organizational infancy, CIW members recognized that depressed wages and exclusion from workers rights are root problems in the community's poverty and key to alleviating the crisis in Florida's fields. To address these issues, the CIW confronted Florida growers who oversee all operations in the field, including salaries. But after little progress and no success, the CIW realized the growers' resistance stemmed partly from their vulnerability under the tremendous pressure and power of large buyers in the agricultural industry. Today's economy is dominated by big business doing big damage. By demanding high-volume, year-round, low-cost tomatoes, their enormous purchasing volume forces growers to cut costs wherever possible. Workers' salaries remain one of the few areas where growers control costs, and thus the

burden falls to the poorest members of the corporate supply chain: the farmworkers.

Although the majority of this country's fresh tomatoes come from fields near Immokalee, the CIW needed evidence that multinational companies contracted tomatoes grown in Florida. Yet, growers and buyers do not publicly disclose their dealings, making it impossible for the CIW to prove how corporations are directly involved in the economic squeeze.



But in 2001, an industry paper printed an article connecting Taco Bell to Florida tomatoes. Soon afterward, the CIW and its allies nationwide called on the Mexican fast food restaurant to meet with the CIW and negotiate fair wages and protections for workers in its supply chain. In the ensuing boycott, thousands of letters flowed into Taco Bell headquarters from bishops, general secretaries, moderators, and other authoritative and esteemed religious leaders. Students removed 22 Taco Bell locations from college and high school campuses, and a multitude of people of faith poured into the streets to support the CIW in peaceful marches, pickets, and other actions, including participating in national days of prayer for farmworker justice and corporate social responsibility; writing letters and postcards to fast-food corporations, hosting the CIW for presentations and meals, and providing lodging during the CIW's national tours. The synergy between people of faith and the farmworkers of the CIW bore fruit in March 2005 when YUM! Brands, the parent company of Taco Bell, agreed to the CIW's demands. Today, Taco Bell directly pays farmworkers in its supply chain, enforces a Code of Conduct for agricultural suppliers *monitored by workers*, and allows for full transparency of its tomato purchases in Florida.

Victory does not rest with the *chalupa*; Taco Bell buys only a fraction of tomatoes picked in Florida. After the CIW sent letters to other major fast food companies seeking to expand the precedent set by Taco Bell, McDonald's responded first and promised to better the terms set between farmworkers and its Mexican food competitor. Here, it is helpful to mention that the Coalition believes that farmworkers should be the voice in decisions impacting the farmworker community.



However, when McDonald's announced plans to reform its tomato supply chain, there was no mention of farmworkers gaining a voice in establishing their own conditions, an unacceptable omission to the CIW. In effect, McDonald's announcement signaled that the world's largest fast food restaurant was in part denying farmworkers' right to self-determination. To reform its system, McDonalds joined the Socially Accountable Farm Employers (SAFE) organization of Florida. SAFE is an extension of the grower's largest lobbying branch in Florida and symbolically includes one social service agency honorably serving the Immokalee migrant community in a capacity unrelated to labor. A McDonald's public relations firm created SAFE to combine a minimalist Code of Conduct with a suspect monitoring and certification process that misleads consumers into believing that abuses in the fields are addressed. McDonald's is simply telling growers to follow national regulations, which are hard to enforce and exclude farmworkers from important provisions including the right to overtime pay, sick leave and the right to organize. SAFE does not address the root causes of farmworker poverty or mistreatment. In an attempt to defend its position in SAFE, McDonald's commissioned a study claiming farmworkers in McDonald's supply chain earn wages nearly three times the minimum wage and are well cared-for by their employers. After its release, the study was met by a chorus of criticism and appall. Dr. Bruce Nissen, Director of the Research Institute on Social and Economic Policy at Florida International University, found it to be "so riddled with errors both large and small that it cannot be accepted as factually accurate on virtually any measure." SAFE and the McDonald's study are merely

public relations strategies, but their implications are pushing farmworkers away from the negotiation table and threatening to undermine progress made for agricultural laborers in the Taco Bell agreement.

What the CIW, with support from Interfaith Action, works for is no less radical or controversial than the messages of Abraham, Jesus or Mohamed. Like these spiritual leaders who, thousands of years ago, invited the outcast, the destitute, the sick, and the poor to tables reserved for the wealthy, the CIW and its faith allies challenge an unjust social and economic order. Church leaders again are writing letters to McDonald's, calling on the company to negotiate honorably with farmworkers. Authors include: Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops), Francis Cardinal George (Archbishop of Chicago), Rev. Clifton Kirkpatrick (Stated Clerk Presbyterian Church U.S.A.), and Dr. Robert Edgar (General Secretary National Council of Churches USA), whose statements are public witness to their support of the CIW. Students at numerous universities have sponsored hunger fasts and have engaged the public in dialogue about the human price of cheap food and bottom-line profits. Interfaith Action encourages people of faith to draw on the rich values of their religious traditions and use their voices to call on McDonald's to work with the CIW for just wages and dignified working conditions for farmworkers in its supply chain. The following are ways to be involved in the campaign:

- writing letters and sending postcards to McDonald's
- participating in CIW actions
- educating and engaging faith communities around this important justice issue

The voice of the faithful has been instrumental in the CIW's work to transform an unjust harvest, and as farmworkers continue forward in the campaign for fair food, persons from all religious convictions are invited to walk on this journey to open America's table so there is a place for everyone. ■

Kathleen Wood is with Interfaith Action of Southwest Florida as a fellow from the Congressional Hunger Center. To learn more, visit www.ciw-online.org and www.allianceforfairfood.org

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