

# FROM THE GROUND UP

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## The Coalition of Immokalee Workers: The People's Farmworker Movement

### Who profits in the Florida Tomato Industry?

Compiled by Bridget Newman

- According to U.S. Department of Labor data, the piece rate paid to tomato harvesters in 1980 was 40 cents per 32 pound bucket. Today, harvesters are paid the same piece rate, earning one-half of what they did twenty years ago in inflation adjusted dollars.<sup>1</sup>
- Workers must pick and haul two tons of tomatoes to make \$50 dollars a day. Taco Bell could double the earnings of tomato harvesters by agreeing to pay just one penny more per pound of tomatoes.<sup>1</sup>
- In 1995, the median personal income for farmworkers in the Southeast was between \$5000-\$7500, the same as in 1988.<sup>3</sup>
- The vast majority of tomato harvesters receive no benefits or overtime pay, despite the fact that the average farmworker labors 12 or more hours a day.<sup>3</sup>
- Taco Bell's 1999 revenues totaled \$5.2 billion.<sup>1</sup>
- Six L's Packing Co. Inc., one of Florida's largest tomato growers and a distributor to Taco Bell, averaged \$120 million in annual revenue since 1986.<sup>1</sup>
- Industry numbers reveal that the cost of containers per 1400 acres of tomatoes in southwest Florida is \$1,050, while the harvest and haul cost for those same tomatoes is \$1,078.<sup>2</sup>

#### Sources

1. Coalition of Immokalee Workers, Executive Summary Tomato Harvester Fact Sheet, February 1998.
2. Smith, Scott A. and Timothy G. Taylor. Production Cost for Selected Vegetables in Florida, August 1996.
3. Student Action with Farmworkers, Farmworkers in the United States Fact Sheet, 2000.

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Image courtesy of CIW

### Who are the Coalition of Immokalee Workers?

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The Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) is a community-based worker organization located in Southwest Florida, with a diverse membership of Latino, Haitian, and Mayan Indian immigrants working in low-wage jobs throughout the state of Florida. The CIW strives to strengthen their community on a basis of reflection and analysis, constant attention to coalition building across ethnic divisions, and an ongoing investment in leadership development to help workers continually develop their skills in community education and organization.

The CIW fights for, among other things: a fair wage, more respect from bosses and the industries where they work, better and more affordable housing, stronger laws and stronger enforcement against those who violate workers' rights, the right to organize on the job without fear of retaliation, and an end to indentured servitude in the fields.

Southwest Florida is one of the nation's most important centers for agricultural production, and Immokalee is home to Florida's largest farmworker community. As such, the majority of CIW members are farmworkers who spend 8-9 months of the year in Southwest Florida then travel north during the summer months for other jobs in agriculture. Many CIW members move out of agriculture and into other low-wage industries, including construction, nursery, and tourism.

**SAF** is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization whose mission is to bring students and farmworkers together to learn about each other's lives, share resources and skills, improve conditions for farmworkers, and build diverse coalitions working for social change.

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## The Immokalee Workers' Struggle for Justice

By Bridget Newman and Brian Payne

### The Annals of CIW

The Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) is rooted in both poverty and hope. Pedro Lopez left Guatemala seventeen years ago to pick vegetables in Immokalee, Florida. He worked long hours without earning a living wage and lived in horrible conditions. Lopez and a handful of other workers concluded that they were more afraid of losing their lives to muggers or their bosses than they were of losing their jobs, so they started organizing what is now the Coalition of Immokalee Workers.

Early accomplishments of the CIW, which continue to today, include the establishment of the following: a highly successful consumer cooperative, breaking the hold of the traditionally overpriced local market; a growing multi-ethnic membership base; weekly radio programs reaching thousands of workers; an innovative program of education and leadership development including participatory video, street art, popular theater, and community festivals; and an annual scholarship program for the children of local workers.

### Chronicle of Accomplishments

One of the first CIW actions against the Immokalee growers took place in 1995. Over 4000 workers joined a strike in protest of a grower proposal to drop hourly wages for tomato pickers from \$4.25 to \$3.85 and pay only ten cents a bucket. Lopez said, "Once we took to the streets and made it clear we weren't going to work for this wage, they had to back down."

During the 1996-1997 season, the CIW launched the "Campaign to End Violence Against Workers in the Fields." This campaign began with a 500-worker march to a local crewleader's house to protest the beating of a Coalition member. Since then, this campaign has evolved into a nationally-recognized program focusing on the elimination of modern-day slavery in Florida's fields. Coordinating with federal authorities from the Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice, the CIW has helped investigate and bring to justice three major debt bondage operations in the past four years. The campaign led to the harshest sentence in the history of farmworker slavery prosecutions and to the end of violence against workers that had plagued the Immokalee-area workers for years.

In 1997, the CIW launched its campaign for "Dignity, Dialogue and a Living Wage." This campaign has brought about several historic changes for Florida farmworkers. Combining community organizing with intense public pressure—including a month-long hunger strike by six CIW members in 1998, in which President Jimmy Carter offered to intervene, and a historic 230-mile march from Ft. Myers to Orlando in 2000—the campaign ended over twenty years of stagnant wages in the tomato industry. Results of the campaign include a first-ever community-based negotiation process that resulted in a 25% raise for over 450 farmworkers, and the unprecedented intervention by Governor Jeb Bush to bring about raises for thousands of other tomato harvesters. Those raises, taken together, represent several million dollars in increased wages for workers in the tomato industry along the entire East Coast every season since 1997.

In February 2000 the CIW led the 230-mile March for "Dignity, Dialogue and a Living Wage" from Ft. Myers to Orlando. This march provided the opportunity for students from various Florida universities to both learn about and participate in the movement to end the sweatshops of the fields. The Student/Farmworker Alliance (SFA) was organized during this time to support the CIW and other farmworkers in their struggles for justice.

### Current Campaign Against Taco Bell

In general, the tomatoes CIW workers produce supply major, multi-national corporations. Long gone are the days when small, family farmers supplied area stores and chains with locally-grown tomatoes. Today, huge corporate growers with multi-state operations sell tomatoes year-round to even bigger corporate buyers, including fast food mega-chains like Taco Bell and Burger King. Those fast food giants receive cheap, high-quality US tomatoes, thanks to the sacrifices of thousands of hard-working Florida farmworkers who pick tomatoes at a piece rate that has remained virtually unchanged for over two decades.

Taco Bell is part of Tricon Global Restaurants, Inc., together with Kentucky Fried Chicken and Pizza Hut. These three major chains control more than 30,000 restaurants around the globe, forming the "world's largest restaurant system in terms of units," according

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## The Immokalee Workers' Struggle for Justice ...continued

to Tricon's 1999 Annual Report. According to that same report, Tricon's system-wide sales reached nearly \$22 billion in 1999, with Taco Bell alone reporting over \$5.2 billion in system-wide sales that year.

According to the agricultural industry journal "The Packer," Taco Bell is a major client of the Immokalee-based Six L's Packing Co, one of the biggest tomato producers in the United States. Fresh tomatoes are a featured component of many of Taco Bell's best-selling products.

Given the sheer volume of Immokalee tomatoes it buys to supply its worldwide operations, and given its size and economic strength, Taco Bell has the power to help bring about more modern, more equitable labor relations in Immokalee's tomato fields.

If Taco Bell were to express its support for dialogue with the CIW to Six L's representatives, negotiations might finally take place between workers and growers. Taco Bell is an important client with a great deal of influence due to the amount of tomatoes it buys every year. If Taco Bell were to voluntarily pay just 1 cent more per pound, and the growers would agree to pass that penny along to the picker, that one penny could almost double the picking piece rate overnight.

The large corporations that buy Florida tomatoes, like Taco Bell, must assume their responsibility to tomato producers by demanding, and obtaining changes in the shameful pay and working conditions suffered by the men and women who pick their tomatoes.

Until Taco Bell assumes its responsibility in the living and working conditions of tomato workers, CIW asks you to honor farmworkers by boycotting Taco Bell.

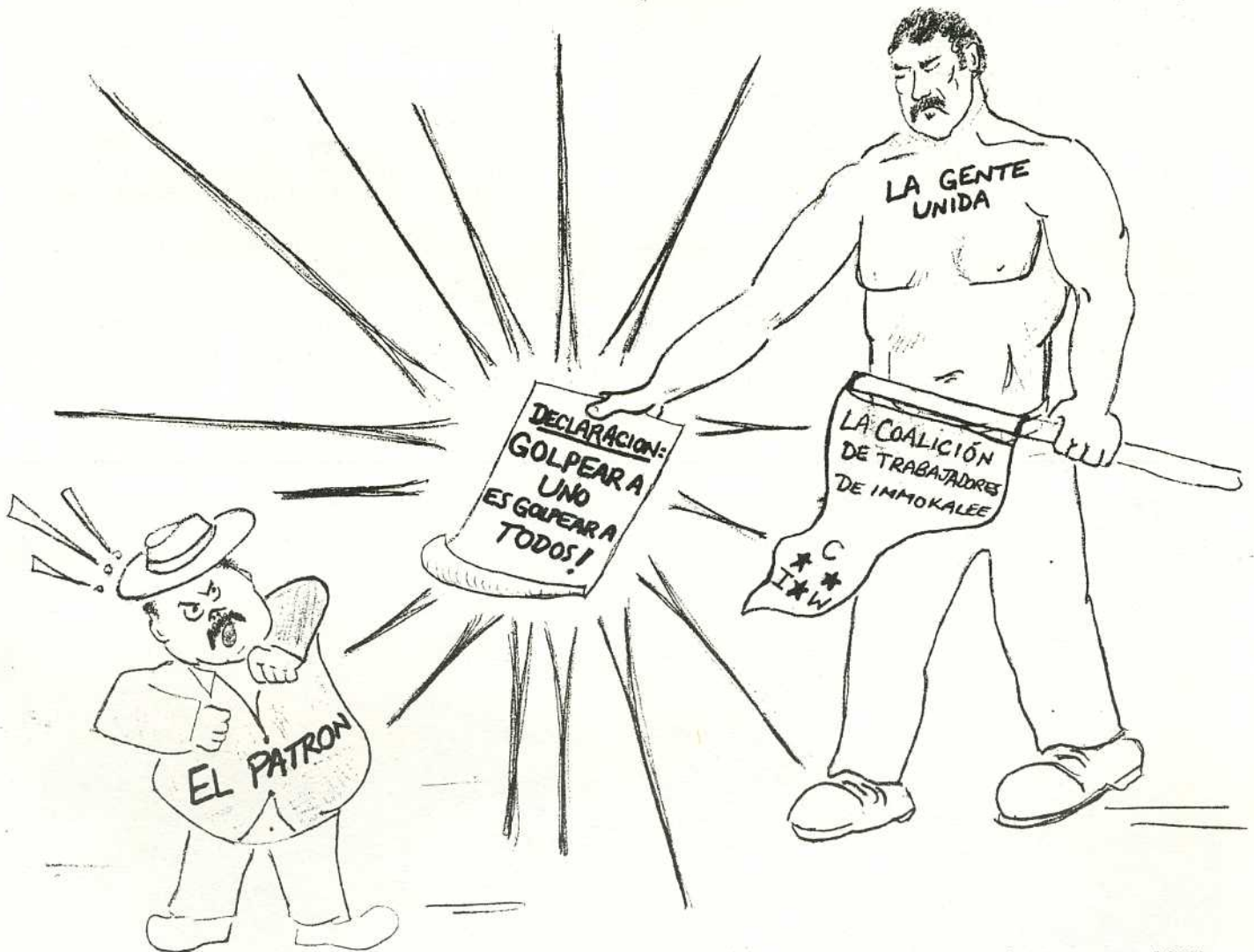


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