

THE DIFFERENCE FAITH MAKES:
RELIGIOUS INFLUENCE IN THE COALITION OF IMMOKALEE WORKERS'
TACO BELL BOYCOTT

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The neo-liberal economic agenda of the last three decades has systematically eroded workers' rights and benefits. Globalization and deregulation, supported by free-market ideologies, have adversely affected workers' lives—both in the U.S. and abroad.¹ We live in a time of soaring healthcare costs, disappearing pension funds, increasing contingency work, and a growing gap between rich and poor. Between 1968 and 2000, the US minimum wage lost over 35% of its value while domestic corporate profits rose more than 158%.² Perhaps more disturbing than these economic realities is the way they are reported: as inevitable, albeit lamentable, features of a new global economy in which fierce international competition demands “cutting the fat” of labor costs.

In the summer of 2005, the U.S. labor movement appeared to be coming apart at the seams, which seemed to confirm the inauspicious forecast for workers in America. The “50th Anniversary Convention” of the AFL-CIO in July 2005 brought the defection of three major unions from its ranks and two more in the ensuing months. This meant that approximately 35% of AFL-CIO membership had disaffiliated. Some see this fracture and its resulting disarray and dissent as the final nail in the coffin for an organized

¹ Vanessa Tait, *Poor Workers' Unions: Rebuilding Labor from Below* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2005), 3.

² *Ibid.*, citing Holly Sklar, Laryssa Mykyta, and Susan Wefald, *Raise the Floor: Wages and Policies That Work for All of Us* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2002), 58.

labor movement that had been increasingly debilitated over the decades with declining membership and lost legal protections.

In this context of profound economic disparity, insecurity, and a seemingly bleak landscape for worker organizing, I turn to the subject of my thesis: The Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW), a community-based farmworker organization in southwestern Florida comprised mostly of immigrant workers from Mexico, Guatemala, and Haiti. They provide an example of how some of the most destitute and disenfranchised workers have successfully organized—against all odds and even outside the established union structure of organized labor—to make gains for those who toil in the fields. In the same year that the AFL-CIO made headlines for its historic rupture, this small organization captured national and international attention by achieving a surprising victory against the largest restaurant corporation in the world, Yum! Brands, Inc. (Yum Brands), through a four-year boycott of its subsidiary, Taco Bell.³

On March 8, 2005, Yum Brands made a precedent-setting agreement in response to the CIW's demands. The agreement represents the first time that fast-food industry leaders have acknowledged and assumed responsibility for the sub-poverty wages and working conditions of farmworkers in its supply chain. Although these wages are technically paid by other employers, Yum Brands agreed to the CIW's demands to pay "a penny more per pound" for tomatoes picked for Taco Bell vendors. This amounted to wage increases of roughly 75%, and Yum Brands further agreed to make those payments *directly* to the CIW. Also, the agreement yielded the "first-ever enforceable Code of Conduct for agricultural suppliers in the fast-food industry," and it included the CIW as

³ Yum! Brands Inc. is a spin off from Pepsi and includes Taco Bell, Kentucky Fried Chicken, A&W, Long John Silver's, and Pizza Hut franchises.

part of its investigative body for monitoring conditions and worker complaints.⁴ The victory represents a significant step toward altering the entrenched power relationships between farmworkers and leaders of the agricultural industry. The U.S. Congressional Hispanic Caucus said, "This is a truly historic agreement, marking perhaps the single greatest advance for farmworkers since the early struggles of the United Farm Workers."⁵

Even before its ultimate success, the Taco Bell Boycott garnered much attention and participation from a diverse cross-section of society. The CIW's boycott campaign and related work of exposing cases of modern-day slavery in the agricultural fields of Florida found their way into television stories and print media, including the *New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *National Geographic*, *The Nation*, and *Rolling Stone Magazine*. The CIW also impressed international human rights organizations, winning the RFK Human Rights Award in 2003, the first U.S.-based recipient in its twenty-year history. The boycott galvanized a broad array of allies, including numerous networks of religious congregations, college students on over three hundred campuses, labor unions, Latino/Chicano groups, dignitaries, authors, anarchists, and Hollywood stars.

I believe the CIW's vibrant and successful campaign against Taco Bell warrants close examination. In this era of corporate consolidation and dwindling power of labor, successful worker-led drives for economic and social justice deserve attention. The interest of millions of working poor who are suffering exploitation calls for thoughtful reflection and analysis of campaigns that succeed (or don't). Those who live at the

⁴ Coalition of Immokalee Workers, "Victory at Taco Bell Analysis," available from <http://www.ciw-online.org/agreementanalysis.html>; Internet; accessed 30 November 2006.

⁵ Coalition of Immokalee Workers, "What They are Saying About the Taco Bell Victory," available from <http://www.ciw-online.org/index.html>; Internet; accessed 1 December 2006.

margins and bear the weight of unjust structures need strategic, effective future organizing and advocacy campaigns for social change.

As both a Christian and an activist for over fifteen years, working both in secular progressive campaigns and faith-based drives for peace and justice, I was particularly interested in the role that religious organizations and faith played in the CIW's Taco Bell campaign. The boycott received national endorsements from the United Church of Christ (UCC), United Methodist Church, Presbyterian Church U.S.A. (PC), the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) among others, and support from various Roman Catholic bishops. What difference, if any, did that make to a campaign? In addition, in my own experience, I had wrestled with whether religious faith makes a difference in a campaign or social movement, but had never studied or probed it systematically. Furthermore, this "faith question" assumed political significance in the wake of the 2004 presidential and congressional elections in which the Democratic defeat "produced a round of soul searching" and led many analysts and politicians to conclude that the Democrats failed to acknowledge and speak the language of faith.⁶ Theoretically, progressives and Democrats did not address the moral values that voters craved. Putting aside the loaded and ambiguous phrase "moral values," and whether this assessment of the 2004 vote is accurate, the elections did surface some key questions about the importance of religious faith to campaigns, such as the link between moral discourse and action to religion, and the role of congregations in influencing politics or campaigns for social justice.

Thus, I embarked on my own research into the CIW-led Taco Bell Boycott (2001-2005). My guiding questions were: How did religious organizations and faith matter?

⁶ "Should Democrats Get Religion?" *CBS News*, 4 November 2004, available from <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/11/04/politics/main653667.shtml>; Internet; accessed 10 December 2006.

How did they impact the campaign? Were they significant factors in its success? I also wanted to know why people were engaged in the campaign—both the farmworkers and the religious allies. What motivated and sustained their involvement?

While I began my investigation with some notion that religious organizations had played a substantive role in the campaign, I was not sure of the scope or depth of the involvement. Since the CIW is a secular worker/human rights organization that does not identify itself as a religious or faith-based organization, I was uncertain whether the religious faith of the workers had made any contribution to the campaign or had any influence in the organization. Yet, I found that the contribution of congregations/religious allies and the role of faith had a profound impact on the CIW-led Taco Bell Boycott. Ultimately, this thesis argues that religious faith played a pivotal role in shaping the moral vision and ethos of this movement and helped motivate and sustain activist engagement.

In order to explain the significance of faith and religious allies in the movement, I begin by giving a sense of the acute exploitation in which farmworkers live in Southwestern Florida. Chapter 2 provides an overview of the political and economic forces that contribute to the social marginalization that makes the CIW's emergence and accomplishments so noteworthy. The first part of Chapter 3 shows the presence of religious support since the inception of the CIW, long before the Taco Bell Boycott. Since religious solidarity proved instrumental in both expanding the CIW's organizing to the regional and state level and in laying the groundwork for national support in the Taco Bell Boycott, the second part of this chapter will show how congregations were, in effect,

“the secret weapon” of the Taco Bell Boycott by outlining seven ways in which they positively effected the campaign.

Chapters 4 and 5 turn from the strategic impact of religious organizations and allies to the religious faith and culture of the farmworkers themselves, as well as the CIW as an organization. Chapter 4 maintains that the robust faith of the workers, rooted in Latino popular Catholicism, served as a cultural resource that helped tool the workers to engage in the CIW campaigns for higher wages and dignity. Their image of a justice-seeking Creator who sides with the poor and sanctions action to end exploitation helped to motivate and console, as well as to generate a vibrant hope in an unlikely victory. Chapter 5 shows how religious faith grounded and shaped the moral vision and ethos of the CIW beyond the more overt manifestations of religious influence, such as prayer vigils. Pursuing this theme of religious faith as an important cultural resource, this chapter shows that the main components of this moral ethos—a profound belief in human dignity as children of God, a greater accountability to community, and a readiness to sacrifice—was animated in part by their Latino popular Catholicism. Furthermore, this chapter also shows how this moral vision and ethos attracted, energized and even transformed many of the allies. Finally, Chapter 6 takes an inventory of the lessons to be gleaned from the Taco Bell Boycott. Ultimately, this study suggests that the CIW is both appealing and effective in building a vibrant movement to reform the fast-food industry because it is operating on the political and cultural level in its organizing, which is required if true renewal is to happen in this country.

The significance of this thesis lies in the illumination it provides for the historical record of the role religion has played in political and social-change organizing. In this

climate where the Christian right seems to be the only sector enjoying “success” at wielding any influence, this thesis documents the impact that churches and faith communities have had in the field of labor rights and economic justice. Also, by examining actions, their strategic value, and the difference they made in the lives of allies, this thesis can help inform future campaigns of solidarity. Moreover, it shows that moral vision, and not just the cognitive merit of a cause, does indeed matter in politics and organizing. Yet, it also suggests that the moral vision that promotes the common good and the communal ethos which holds the promise for authentic social and political renewal are more likely to come from those who know suffering than from the politicians aspiring to political office.

Methodology

To understand the CIW and ascertain the role that religious organizations and faith played in the Taco Bell Boycott, I employed the following methods over the course of one year: a) historical research, b) participant observation, and c) in-depth interviews. I relied on the cooperation of the staff of Interfaith Action of Southwest Florida (IA), a small non-profit organization that shares an office and works in partnership with the CIW, to help facilitate all three components of this study.

A) In addition to using books, magazine articles, and on-line resources, I also benefited from the CIW and IA staff and former board members who made available many of their organizational and personal archives of newspaper clippings, flyers, grant reports, and minutes of the early meetings of Religious Leaders Concerned (RLC). This proved valuable in tracing and understanding the origins and development of religious support for the CIW.

B) I spent three weeks in Immokalee in January of 2006 conducting interviews and doing participant-observation. During that visit I had the opportunity to watch presentations by CIW staff for students doing immersion programs, to participate in a walking tour of Immokalee, to march with the CIW in Fort Myers, to attend a gathering of local religious leaders and a regional gathering of faith-based farmworker allies, to observe three community meetings hosted by the CIW attended by fifty to seventy workers, to observe the daily interactions of the CIW with the Immokalee community, and to benefit from dozens of informal conversations with IA and CIW staff. Together these experiences provided invaluable insights into the socio-political realities of farmworkers and day laborers in the region.

On March 24, I flew back to Immokalee to participate in the first eight days of the CIW's "McDonald's 'Real Rights' Truth Tour" (March 26-April 4, 2006) from Immokalee to Chicago, Ill. This was the public launch of their campaign demanding that McDonald's follow the example of Taco Bell and work with the CIW to secure higher wages and just working conditions. The caravan (divided into three routes) stopped in sixteen cities through the South and Midwest. In each town, workers participated in community forums, spoke in grammar school and college classrooms, and joined locals to protest at their local McDonald's. Each night, the van-loads of workers and allies would stay in a different community, with sleeping arrangements and meals provided by local social, political, and religious organizations. The Truth Tour culminated on Saturday, April 1, with a five-mile march through downtown Chicago, where McDonald's is headquartered, and a protest attended by over five hundred people.

I volunteered as a driver for much of the journey from Immokalee to Chicago and translated as a pinch-hitter at various community forums. This volunteer experience proved to be an important complement to my experience in Immokalee. It gave me direct experience of their public outreach and greater insights into their culture and ethos, which I explore in Chapter 5, and a chance to witness the contributions and solidarity of student, community, and religious allies.

C) In order to discover the role that faith and religious organizations played in the Taco Bell Boycott and to gather perspectives on what motivated participation and engendered success, I conducted in-depth interviews with thirty-four individuals falling into three categories: 1) farmworkers who are members of the CIW, 2) religious allies of the CIW, and 3) other allies of the CIW whose participation was not religiously affiliated. I identified most interviewees through staff of IA. However, I also sought worker and ally referrals from my interviewees, which yielded a few more subjects. These oral interviews, conducted in person or by phone, lasted forty to seventy-five minutes. Nearly all the interviews were taped and later transcribed. All interviewees have been given pseudonyms, except for CIW co-founder, Lucas Benitez; first staff member of IA, Damara Luce; and Rev. Noelle Damico, the Taco Bell Boycott Coordinator for the PC. In some cases biographical details have been altered to ensure confidentiality.

Apart from these formal in-depth interviews about people's personal experience and assessment of the Taco Bell Boycott, I also conducted, but did not tape, five informational interviews seeking the organizational history of both the CIW and IA. I am indebted to current and former staff of IA for at least a dozen other informal interviews about all aspects of the CIW and IA.

Population and Sample

Farmworkers/Members of CIW. I interviewed thirteen CIW members, five staff and eight general members. I explored their personal involvement with the CIW, their religious background and activity, and their experience and perceptions of collaboration and contributions from the religious community. Six members in my sample are from Mexico, six from Guatemala, and one from Cuba. I was not able to interview Haitian workers (about 10% of the Immokalee community, but a smaller percentage of CIW membership) since I was unable to secure Creole translation. All but one in my sample were men, but this gender imbalance reflects the reality in the fields around Immokalee. The workers I interviewed had been in Immokalee anywhere from one to fourteen years, with the average time approaching six years.

Religious Allies. I interviewed fifteen allies from the Christian religious community who had been involved with the Taco Bell Boycott. I sought a mixture of both clergy and laity involved with the CIW at the local/state level in Florida before the Taco Bell Boycott, as well as those mobilized during the boycott in other parts of the country. I relied primarily on recommendations from the IA staff and on referrals from interviewees. But I also received a couple of recommendations to interview individuals outside of IA's contacts. Thus, my sample of fifteen allies consists of seven allies rooted in Florida (including three IA staff members⁷), five allies representing other parts of the U.S. (Southern California, Arizona, and Louisville, Ky.), and two with a national focus who hold staff positions out of their denomination's headquarters. My sample includes

⁷ At the time of the interview, one was no longer on staff, but had been on staff throughout the Taco Bell campaign.

four UCC members, four members of the PC, five Roman Catholics, one evangelical trans-denominational Christian, and one who is non-denominational. Eight in my sample are women and seven men. It consists of nine lay persons, two ordained Presbyterian elders, and four ordained ministers. Two in my sample are Latino/a, one is African-American and twelve are Caucasian.

My sample does not include the full spectrum of Christian religious denominations or other faith traditions that endorsed or supported the boycott. This thesis primarily looks at the role of Christian institutions and Christian allies in the Taco Bell Boycott. My intent is not to marginalize or dismiss the contributions of allies of other faith traditions, but to acknowledge the limited scope of my investigation. My aim was not to survey all religious supporters. I wanted to engage some of the most invested in the campaign and/or those affiliated with organizational support at the national level. IA staff acknowledged that the mainstay of religious support came from the Christian community, largely as a response to the predominantly Christian constituency of the CIW membership and because they did not have the time to cultivate extensive support beyond that community.⁸ Yet, even in my focus on Christian support, I would have preferred more representation from among the various Christian denominations in my sample. But I received more referrals to volunteers from among the ranks of Catholics, Presbyterians and UCC members, and was also constrained by the responses I received to my requests for interviews. Ultimately, however, my sample reflects the denominations that yielded

⁸ Several IA staff members and religious allies in Florida spoke about the challenges they found working ecumenically in Southwest Florida, let alone across different religions. One minister commented that there was a dearth of ecumenical networks in Southwest Florida, and that one of the appealing features of working alongside the CIW was the ecumenical collaboration that it had spawned.

the greatest institutional support of the CIW and the Taco Bell Boycott, in providing early endorsements, dedicated staff, and sites of hospitality during Truth Tours.

My sample of religious allies is also narrower in terms of racial diversity than I would have liked. Yet, the base of religious support in Florida has come from the affluent churches in the coastal communities not far from Immokalee, which are largely composed of wealthy and upper-middle class retirees from the North. In general, the IA staff and the CIW characterize their religious base as mostly white and middle-class, while recognizing that there are exceptions. Although I did not ascertain income information from my subjects, I believe that the vast majority fit that description.⁹

Other Allies. I also interviewed six allies that were unaffiliated with congregations or religious organizations in terms of their activism with the CIW, but who came from other important constituencies, such as students, global justice organizers, human rights advocates, cultural artists, and the Chicano community and community allies. I explored their understandings of the role that faith and religious organizations had played in the campaign, their own involvement and motivations, and their analysis of the successes or shortcomings of the movement.

Limitations

There are limitations to this study. First, there are linguistic, cultural and class barriers between me and the farmworkers I interviewed. I could compensate somewhat since I do speak Spanish and also recorded my interviews. I also have experience living and working in Latino immigrant communities. But, as an outsider, my own knowledge of the CIW and Immokalee is limited. Thus, I relied heavily on the insights and

⁹ That is not to suggest they have the same affluence that typify the coastal communities, since the majority of allies I interviewed work for churches and religious institutions not known for bloated salaries.

perspectives from the thirty-four interviews with people who are members or have worked with the CIW extensively.

My focus on the role of faith and religion in the CIW-led Taco Bell campaign is limited in scope and does not tell the whole story about the array of contributions from diverse allies or the many cultural and political forces which shaped and informed the movement. However, I chose this perspective not only for its personal and social relevance, but also because other researchers have addressed other themes and factors, and they are likely to do so again in the future. Moreover, I suspect that the important role of religious faith and culture, as well as the contributions of religious congregations, are likely to be overlooked by contemporary researchers and analysts of the CIW because of the secular bias that is pervasive among progressive movements and its participants and observers.¹⁰

¹⁰ Sociologist Christian Smith notes that social movement theory has tended to ignore the role and impact of religion in recent decades. He outlines many reasons for this neglect in the academy. Some of these are: 1) the domination of the social sciences by secularization theory, which believed that with modernization religion would diminish and be an increasingly marginal factor in the world; 2) the prevalence of structural-functionalism as a school of thought (1940s-1970s) which tended to see religion primarily as a force aimed at promoting social harmony, and thus ignored its disruptive capacities and potential for social change; 3) beyond the Civil Rights movement, religion did not seem to play an important role in recent watershed movements such as the anti-Vietnam, student, women's and environmental movement. See Christian Smith, "Bringing Religion Back In," in *Disruptive Religion: The Force of Faith in Social Movement Activism*, ed. Christian Smith (New York: Routledge, 1996), 2-5. Though Smith notes that these theories have been largely debunked in the academy, I do see these assumptions and biases still alive and well in progressive circles, which can preclude participants and analysts from seeing religion that challenges the status quo as a significant factor in social movements.

CHAPTER 2
SOWING SEEDS OF RESISTANCE

It's better to die on your feet, than to live a lifetime on your knees.

Emiliano Zapata

The above quote is far from metaphorical for Immokalee's tomato pickers who labor long hours on their hands and knees filling buckets at a frenetic pace in South Florida's fields. At forty to fifty cents per thirty-two-pound bucket, a *picatero* (tomato picker) must scurry to fill 125 buckets—two tons of fruit—to clear fifty dollars for the day. If inclement weather limits the daily harvest, the end of a day may yield only a few dollars. Florida's tomato pickers do not receive an hourly wage and are almost universally paid a piece rate.¹ This piece rate remained stagnant at forty cents for seventeen years, from 1980 thru 1996.² Though it inched up five to ten cents around 1997, it would have been necessary to raise the piece rate to seventy-three and a half cents per bucket that year to match inflation since 1980.³

¹ Oxfam America, *Like Machines in the Fields: Workers without Rights in American Agriculture* (Boston: Oxfam America, 2004), 12.

² Coalition of Immokalee Workers, "Facts and Figures: Farmworker Wages and Working Conditions," Handout summarizing Department of Labor findings which include statistics from its *National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS) of 1998*.

³ *Ibid.*; The increase is likely a direct result of labor strikes and fasts organized by farmworkers in Immokalee which is detailed below.

In this chapter, I will provide a brief overview of the economic distress in which farmworkers continue to live. I will focus on the socio-economic conditions prevailing in Southwest Florida which make the exploitation of the region's agricultural laborers particularly acute. This will provide a deeper understanding of the need for organized resistance. I will then trace the birth of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, describe its campaigns for dignity and higher wages over the last ten years, and address the local and national impact of their Taco Bell Boycott.

Plight of Farmworkers

Stagnant and deteriorating real wages such those earned by Florida's tomato pickers make farmworkers among the poorest, if not *the* poorest laborers in the U.S. economy.⁴ Farmworkers have the lowest annual family incomes of any U.S. wage and salary workers.⁵ Half of farmworker families earn less than \$10,000 per year, and half of all individuals earn less than \$7,500 per year.⁶ Moreover, the vast majority of farmworkers receive no benefits of any kind—health insurance, sick leave, paid vacation. Also, their right to overtime pay is legally denied to them. Agricultural workers are excluded from this basic protection—afforded to most other workers—under the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) originally enacted in 1938.⁷ However, overtime is, in effect,

⁴ Oxfam America, 2.

⁵ Charles D. Thompson, Jr., introduction to Charles D. Thompson, Jr. and Melinda F. Wiggins, eds., *The Human Cost of Food: Farmworkers' Lives, Labor, and Advocacy* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2002), 12.

⁶ Oxfam America, 2 citing figures from the *NAWS 1997-1998*.

⁷ “With the notable exception of California, the majority of states—including Florida and North Carolina, two of the largest users of agricultural labor—have failed to provide farmworkers with the basic protections denied to them under U.S. federal law.” Oxfam, 44, summarizing Maralyn Edid, *Farm Labor Organizing: Trends & Prospects* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994). The legal protections

imposed on many farmworkers. As Luisa Fernandez, a tomato picker in Immokalee describes, “It is compulsory...because once you are in the field, you can’t get back to your house. The boss is the one who takes you to the field and brings you back home.”⁸

Yet, most farmworkers do not have legal recourse to organize for just compensation and improved working conditions. They are excluded from the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) passed in 1935, which protects most workers’ right to collective bargaining and to form unions.⁹ This discrimination in labor law directly contributes to the poverty and exploitation that thrives in the agricultural industry. An increasing number of migrant workers find themselves even more vulnerable to abuse because they are undocumented workers. Agricultural employers are more frequently choosing to employ recent and undocumented immigrants to harvest their crops instead of U.S.-born and more established immigrants. The share of undocumented workers in the farm labor force increased significantly, from 7% in 1989, to 37% in 1994-1995, and to 53% in 2001-2002.¹⁰ Growers’ organizations contend that this development is the

established in California are largely the result of successful organizing by the United Farm Workers, the first union of farm workers to win a contract covering field labor in the United States. The most notable legislation enacted was the Agricultural Labor Relations Act (ALRA) of 1975, which granted the right to organize and join a union.

⁸ Oxfam America, 13.

⁹ Racial prejudice is a significant factor in the exclusion of farmworkers from the protection of labor laws enacted during the New Deal and can be “traced to President Franklin Roosevelt’s need to maintain a Democratic Party coalition which included Southern white racists who sought to protect the plantation system that employed large numbers of African-Americans.” Ibid., 39 relying on Marc Linder, *Migrant Workers and Minimum Wages: Regulating the Exploitation of Agricultural Labor in the United States* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992).

¹⁰ U.S. Department of Labor, *National Agricultural Workers Survey 1994-1995 (NAWS)* (1997), Research Report No. 6 [report on-line]; available from <http://www.doleta.gov/agworker/report/main.cfm>; Internet; accessed 4 July 2006; U.S. Department of Labor, *NAWS 2001-2002* (2005), Research Report No. 9 [report on-line]; available from http://www.doleta.gov/MSFW/pdf/naws_rpt9.pdf; Internet; accessed 4 July 2006.

result of the lack of domestic labor force willing to do the work. However, farmworkers and their allies argue this trend reveals the industry's desire for a more docile and pliable workforce with fewer rights and less bargaining power.¹¹ Their lack of legal protections and fear of deportation make undocumented workers highly susceptible to exploitation. At a meeting for Guatemalan workers in Immokalee in 1989, farmworkers voiced their distress at the lack of fresh drinking water and toilets in the fields, and at having to wash their hands in ditches filled with dirty and poisoned waters.¹² They complained, "We are being treated like animals. We do not have break time. The bosses allow us only fifteen minutes for lunch and are always mistreating us...."¹³

Conditions in Immokalee

Disturbingly, all too little has changed for the farmworkers in Immokalee, a town tucked away at the northern tip of the Everglades, since it was thrust into public view with the airing of the documentary *Harvest of Shame* in 1960. The film, narrated by broadcast legend Edward R. Murrow, exposed the misery of Florida's rural agricultural workers. Images of desperate men and women making as little as one dollar a day, squalid housing conditions, and malnourished children shocked the U.S. audience. It also evoked the ire of growers who saw it as biased propaganda. The American Farm Federation attacked *Harvest of Shame* even before its broadcast and it was denounced by

¹¹ Growers' associations have recently lobbied for new guestworker programs on the basis of scarcity of domestic labor even though "the GOA [General Accounting Office] has found that there is a surplus of agricultural labor in the United States already (U.S. General Accounting Office 1997)." See Garry G. Geffert, "H-2A Guestworker Program: A Legacy of Importing Agricultural Labor" in *The Human Cost*, 134. For more on the reality of agricultural labor surplus see David Griffith and Ed Kissam, *Working Poor: Farmworkers in the United States* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995). In fact, underemployment among farmworkers is widespread. See Oxfam America, 14.

¹² Griffith and Kissam, 68.

¹³ Ibid.

Congress members from farm states, including Democratic Sen. Spessard L. Holland of Florida, who had ties to citrus growers.¹⁴

The deplorable working conditions in Immokalee and the cozy relationship between Florida's politicians and the agricultural industry persists over forty years later. Agriculture is a multi-billion dollar industry in Florida, second only to tourism in generating state revenue. Florida provides much of the country's winter produce. Immokalee yields citrus, peppers, cucumbers, squash and watermelon, and is at the "heart of Florida's \$600 million tomato industry."¹⁵ While mention of agriculture sometimes conjures bucolic images of small industrious family farms, this is far from the current reality. At present the majority of agriculture production within Southwest Florida is dominated by a handful of corporations.¹⁶ The influx of cheaper Mexican tomatoes as a result of the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) also pushed the smaller tomato growers out of business, leaving the larger farms in the game. "I'm down to the mean ones," said Reginald Brown, Manager of the Florida Tomato Committee, which consists of all significant growers in Florida and whose membership declined from three hundred to seventy-five over the last decade.¹⁷ According to a study done by the

¹⁴ "Harvest of Shame," [review of documentary on-line]; available from <http://times.discovery.com/convergence/harvestofshame/harvestofshame.html>; Internet; accessed on 6 July 2006.

¹⁵ Greg Asbed, "For Pickers, Slavery Tastes like Tomatoes," *Palm Beach Post*, Sunday 30 March 2003, 1, 7 (E).

¹⁶ Brian Payne, "Taking Back the Reins of Identity Formation: The Evolution of a Grassroots Organization in a South Florida Migrant Farm Working Community" (Masters Thesis, University of Florida, 2000), 54.

¹⁷ Oxfam, 36 citing Philip Mattera and Mafruza Khan, "Supply Chain Dynamics for Fresh Tomatoes and Pickling Cucumbers in the United States," (Report prepared for Oxfam America, 2003), 10.

USDA's Economic Research Service, the top five Florida grower-shippers account for 45% of the state's volume of tomatoes shipped; the top 10 account for 70%.¹⁸

Even while corporate consolidation of Florida's fields intensified over the past decade, in reality, Immokalee has always been a "company town." This was as clear to the farmworkers depicted in *Harvest of Shame*, as it was to the sharecroppers and tenants before them, and to the slaves before that. Inequality is not new to the South or to agriculture. Professor Charles Thompson reminds us that the Southeast, "the region once dominated by slavery," is steeped in a long history of "two-tiered farming, with an owner class and a class of slaves and later renters."¹⁹ However, corporate ownership has a way of intensifying the gulf between the owning class and the laborers and consolidating profits in the hands of fewer and fewer. Immokalee's home of Collier County testifies to this phenomenon. Collier County farms (nearly four times larger than average farms in Florida, with the highest annual value of products sold) boasted profits considerably higher than for farm owners in the rest of Florida and the United States.²⁰ Also, while the real wages of farm owners between 1970 and 1995 decreased by 57% in the U.S. and 16% in Florida, it increased by 94% in Collier County.²¹ However, during this same period, there was a decline in the real wages of farmworkers. A University of Florida

¹⁸ Oxfam America, 36.

¹⁹ Charles D. Thompson Jr., "Layers of Loss: Migrants, Small Farmers, and Agribusiness," in *The Human Cost*, 57.

²⁰ Payne, 55-56, using data from University of Florida, *Florida Statistical Abstract 1998* (Gainesville, FL: Bureau of Economic and Business Research, 1998).

²¹ Payne, 56.

survey found that the average income for farmworkers in Immokalee in 1998 was just \$6,574—even lower than the national median of \$7,500.²²

Despite the miserable pay and working conditions, there is no lack of laborers. Immokalee is the gateway for thousands of immigrants entering the country for the first time. The population of Immokalee fluctuates tremendously according to the season. The 2000 census put the population close to 20,000 people and it swells to 30,000 during the harvest season of roughly October to May. The migrant workers in southwest Florida come primarily from Mexico (78%)—increasingly from the southern states of Guerrero, Oaxaca and Chiapas—Guatemala (17 %) and Haiti (4%).²³ This represents a significant demographic shift from 1970-71, when almost a third were Caucasian, 56% African-American, and less than 10% were Mexican and Guatemalan.²⁴ The other significant demographic shift over the years is that farmworkers are increasingly young, unaccompanied, foreign-born males.²⁵ While some of the laborers are seasonal (i.e., they work seasonally but stay in the area off-season), most in Immokalee are migrant farmworkers who travel up the East Coast with the crops after the harvest ends in Florida. The seasonal and transitory nature of Immokalee’s population renders the town’s name ironic. “Immokalee” is a Seminole word meaning “my home.”

²² John Bowe, "Nobodies: Does Slavery Exist in America?," *The New Yorker*, April 21 & 28 2003, 121.

²³ Payne, 43.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ While many do in fact have spouses and partners in their home country, they live here as single men. Few can afford to bring their spouses and family members over because the cost of crossing the border has escalated with increased U.S. security measures. This and the high cost of living, as well as decreased earning power make the journey prohibitive.

The housing conditions in Immokalee make it virtually impossible to make the place home. Too many farmworkers live in substandard structures marked by severe overcrowding. There is a dearth of affordable housing due to both a lack of available housing units and a lack of competition:

The town's largest landlord, a family named Blocker, owns several hundred old shacks and mobile homes, many rusting and mildew-stained, which can rent for upward of two hundred dollars a week, a square-footage rate approaching Manhattan's. (Heat and phone service are not provided). It isn't unusual for twelve workers to share a trailer.²⁶

The scenes inside trailers evoke images associated with crowded urban slums in the Third World. Workers hang sheets to divide space and squeeze mattresses on the living room and kitchen floors in order to afford the exorbitant rent. Many of Immokalee's neighborhoods consist of tightly packed rows of mobile homes, which make up 43% of all housing units.²⁷ Dilapidated structural features, such as rotting floor boards, sagging roofs, unstable steps, and holes in walls are commonplace and pose risks to health and safety. Yet, workers are often disinclined to complain, for many trailers are managed by the very crew leaders (or their family members) for whom they depend on jobs.

These descriptions of unhealthy and substandard housing facilities, of exploitive working conditions and sub-poverty wages, and of a powerful, rapacious agricultural industry suggest that not much has changed in Immokalee since Edward R Murrow's exposé.²⁸ Certainly, the faces of the migrants have changed. The languages and

²⁶ Bowe, 106.

²⁷ Griffith and Kissam, 35.

²⁸ Certainly, this is not the case in California where the 1960s saw the emergence of the United Farm Worker Movement under the charismatic leadership of César Chávez whose origins go back to 1962 when he founded the National Farmworkers Association in 1962. This group was thrust into national prominence with the Delano grape strike in 1965 and the ensuing table-grape boycott, one of the most

ethnicities have diversified. You can hear Spanish, Mixtec, Mam, Kanjobal, or Haitian Creole spoken on any given corner. In many ways Immokalee now “resembles a densely populated inner-city ghetto far more than a small rural town.”²⁹ But the entrenched power dynamic between the growers and the workers remains the same. Or does it?

Birth of Resistance

To say that nothing has changed in Immokalee is neither fair nor accurate. Something significant shifted the political and social landscape there: an organized group of farmworkers is standing up to challenge what they call “sweatshops in the fields.” This group, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW), is a community-based worker organization. Its membership consists of over 2,500 workers who are largely Latino, Haitian, and Mayan Indian immigrants who labor in the fields and other low-wage jobs. They are challenging not only the agricultural industry, but also the fast-food giants, demanding fair treatment for all those who harvest the nation’s fruits and vegetables.

The Coalition of Immokalee Workers began their organizing work in 1993 out of space at the local Catholic church, Our Lady of Guadalupe.³⁰ A group of workers began meeting weekly to discuss the harsh reality of their lives and to seek ways to improve them and their community. CIW member Greg Asbed explains, “In the early 1990s there was a confluence (by a sort of historical coincidence) of politically sophisticated, experienced immigrants to Immokalee, people who in one way or another had been

successful boycotts in all of union history. The UFW helped win significant economic gains and legal protections for farmworkers in California as noted above.

²⁹ Griffith and Kissam, 33.

³⁰ In the early days the organizing was done under the name of the Southwest Florida Farmworker Project. The CIW was formally birthed in 1996 when it moved into its own offices.

participants in popular organizing efforts in their home countries.”³¹ These workers included Haitians who had been active in the Peasant Movement of Papaye and who were forced to flee after the coup against popularly elected President Aristide in 1991, as well as indigenous immigrants from Chiapas, Oaxaca, and Guatemala who had been involved in fighting for human and indigenous rights.

One of the first activities the workers undertook was a participatory investigation into the needs and concerns of their fellow workers. They found the three most common grievances to be: 1) physical abuse in the fields, 2) miserable wages, and 3) the terrible imbalance of power between the workers and the growers.³² In order to confront these issues on a broader community level, the initial organizing group began hosting weekly meetings open to all workers. At these meetings, which continue today, workers were encouraged to reflect on their own life experience, to analyze their reality, and to “begin to redefine their relationship to the forces that shape their lives.”³³ The workers engage in this process of popular education, which relies heavily on images (e.g., drawings, theater, song, video, stories, etc.) to help facilitate group conversation, make political analysis understandable, and move toward action and problem-solving. Early on, the founding members of the coalition also created week-long retreats and skill-building workshops. This emphasis on popular education and leadership development served to build a larger base of workers who were informed and better prepared to organize for change.

³¹ Melody Gonzalez, “Awakening the Consciousness of the Labor Movement: The Case of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers” (Senior Honors Thesis, University of Notre Dame, 2005), 9.

³² *A Fair Harvest: Religions Response to Immigration Issues*, directed by John P. Blessington and produced by Ted Holmes, 30 min. (CBS Television Network, 2006), videocassette.

³³ Coalition of Immokalee Workers, “Consciousness + Commitment = Change” in *Globalize Liberation: How to Uproot the System and Build a Better World*, ed. David Solnit (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2004), 354.

Two years into this process, this fledgling group was put to the test in 1995 when Pacific Land Co., one of the region's largest tomato growers, attempted to cut the picking wage—a wage already stagnant and falling in real terms. This spurred the new group into action. They held a series of emergency meetings and mobilized over three thousand workers to stay out of the fields for a week. It was the first-ever general strike in Immokalee history and ended with the company rescinding the wage-cut. A year later, the CIW tackled the number one complaint of workers: violence in the fields. A tomato picker bleeding profusely landed at the Coalition's door. He had been beaten by his crew leader for asking for a drink of water. The CIW organized five hundred workers to march directly to the labor contractor's house, using the slogan, *Golpear a uno, es golpear a todos* (To beat one of us, is to beat all of us). The following day workers also boycotted the fields that the offending crew leaders managed. CIW co-founder Lucas Benitez attests to the effectiveness of that action: "Since then, there has been no reports of physical violence in Immokalee to workers in the fields."³⁴

As part of their ongoing effort to raise the piece-rate above 1980 levels, the CIW staged a second general strike in December of 1997 after gathering two thousand postcards from workers requesting a raise. Over the Christmas season, six members engaged in a thirty-day hunger strike that garnered media attention and galvanized tremendous support from Southwest Florida communities and beyond. The fast ended with the intervention of former president Jimmy Carter, who offered to mediate a

³⁴ Rob Gurwitt, "Power to the Pickers," *Mother Jones*, July/August 2004, available from http://www.motherjones.com/news/hellraiser/2004/07/07_400.html; Internet; accessed 30 July 2006. Actually, this statement was true until February 2006 when a worker was directed to the coalition because he had been punched and threatened with a knife by his crew leader. See Janine Zeitlin, "State Starts Investigation into Farm Company's Records," *Naples Daily News*, 28 February 2006.

dialogue between the workers and growers. The growers, however, did not respond, with the notable exception of Garguilo Inc., which agreed to raise the piece rate ten cents per bucket.³⁵ Though neither the fast nor the high-profile intervention yielded a dialogue with growers, these activities helped secure “industry-wide raises of 13-25%” and “a new-found political and social respect from the outside world.”³⁶

The CIW increasingly relied on rousing the conscience of the outside world, as growers remained uncooperative. In March of 2000, the Coalition organized a 234-mile “March for Dignity, Dialogue and a Fair Wage” from Fort Myers to the headquarters of the powerful Florida Fruit & Vegetable Association (FFVA) in Orlando. This march was reminiscent of the famous three-hundred-mile pilgrimage from Delano to Sacramento that the United Farm Workers (UFW) made in the spring of 1966 to highlight the exploitation of striking farmworkers in California’s Central Valley. It is noteworthy, however, that the destination of the CIW march was not the state capitol, but a political lobby group of Florida’s growers. This is indicative of the political shift that has occurred in the intervening decades where the power of local and state governments is increasingly circumscribed by or controlled by corporate interests.

Moving Up the Power Pyramid

After six years of fighting largely in Southwest Florida and on the state level, the CIW began to recognize that there is a pecking order of corporate power, and the growers were not at the top. They no longer wielded the power and independence they did in the

³⁵ Mireya Navarro, "Florida Tomato Pickers Take on Growers," *New York Times*, 1 February 1998.

³⁶ Coalition of Immokalee Workers, “About CIW,” available from <http://www.ciw-online.org/about.html>; Internet; accessed 10 July 2006.

days of early UFW organizing. In fact, the U.S. produce market has transformed since the 1980s.³⁷ This once-fragmented market has experienced rapid consolidation with the emergence of mega-stores, warehouse clubs and fast food giants, which have effectively eliminated many of the wholesalers who typically bought from growers and then sold to retail outlets. Wal-Mart, for example, which sells 19% of all groceries in the United States, deals directly with produce suppliers and sets the terms and conditions.³⁸ They have the clout and purchasing power to negotiate the lowest possible wholesale prices. This puts pressure on the growers-shippers to pass risks and costs down the supply chain in order to maintain their own profit margins. Thus farmworkers, the lowest on the totem pole, get squeezed. Many growers see labor as the only area where they can reduce costs since they have little control over rising prices of equipment or pesticides.

Realizing the tremendous influence that huge retailers and consolidated buyers possess over growers, and ultimately, the lives of farmworkers, the CIW declared a boycott on Taco Bell in April 2001. In an industry journal, "The Packer," the CIW discovered an article that confirmed a long-term contractual relationship between Taco Bell and the Six L's Packing Company, one of its Immokalee-based suppliers and one of the biggest producers of fresh tomatoes in the country.³⁹ While Taco Bell buys only 1% of Florida's tomato production, this amounted to ten million pounds in 2004.⁴⁰ The CIW

³⁷ Oxfam America, 26.

³⁸ Ibid., 2, citing Steven Greenhouse, "Wal-Mart, Driving Workers and Supermarkets Crazy," *New York Times*, 19 October 2003.

³⁹ Coalition of Immokalee Workers, "FAQ's on the Taco Bell Boycott," Handout, obtained 24 January 2006.

⁴⁰ Elly Leary, "Immokalee Workers Take Down Taco Bell," *Monthly Review* 57, no. 5 (2005), available from <http://www.monthlyreview.org/1005leary.htm>; Internet; accessed 15 July 2006.

maintained that this made them complicit in the exploitation of farmworkers by pushing wages downward and profiting off the resulting cheap labor. In 1999, Taco Bell reported \$5.2 billion in annual sales.⁴¹ The CIW argued that with power comes responsibility and that Taco Bell had the ability to require the growers to produce the tomatoes in just and humane ways. Thus, the Immokalee farmworkers called on Taco Bell to use its leverage to bring about real changes in the fields of Florida. They demanded 1) a meaningful three-part dialogue with Taco Bell representatives, their tomato suppliers, and CIW workers; 2) a “penny more per pound” of tomatoes picked, nearly doubling the piece rate and making it commensurate with 1980 real wages; and 3) a code of conduct to be created with the input of farmworkers and applied to all of Taco Bell’s tomato suppliers.

Taco Bell met the CIW’s many overtures and eventual boycott announcement with silence. They ignored the CIW for nearly two years into their boycott. Taco Bell denied any accountability since they were not the direct employers of the farmworkers and argued that they “would never get involved in a third-party labor dispute.”⁴² So, the CIW took their campaign for corporate accountability on the road, engaging the people who had the real power to influence Taco Bell: the consumers. The CIW organized an annual “Taco Bell Truth Tour,” a cross-country caravan ending at the headquarters of Taco Bell in Irvine, California, stopping at over a dozen cities along the way to educate students, congregations, labor unions, immigrant rights organizations, and others about the plight of Florida’s tomato pickers. With the Taco Bell Boycott, Immokalee workers

⁴¹ Coalition of Immokalee Workers, “FAQ’s.”

⁴² Asbed, “For Pickers.”

emerged from the recesses of Florida's agricultural swamplands into the public spotlight. But that wasn't the only campaign that thrust the CIW into the national consciousness.

Their anti-slavery campaign also earned them widespread recognition. In 2003, both *The New Yorker* magazine and *National Geographic* ran feature stories on the ongoing reality of slavery in the twenty-first century. The former referred to South Florida as "ground zero for modern slavery."⁴³ Over the past decade, the CIW has worked with the Department of Justice and played a key role in helping to discover, investigate, and prosecute six slavery operations, helping to liberate over one thousand workers. A recent victory against indentured servitude in November of 2002 resulted in the conviction of three crew leaders operating in Lake Placid, Florida. They forced seven hundred workers into slave labor in the citrus groves under armed guards, threatening them with death should they try to leave, and beating and pistol-whipping anyone suspected of trying to escape or supporting one. Several CIW members were instrumental in building this case and prosecuting it, even going undercover to gather more information and helping workers to escape. For their work on this case and their combined years of struggle with the CIW fighting poverty and human rights abuses in the agricultural industry, three members were awarded the Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Award in 2003. It was the first time that this award was presented to any U.S.-based organization in its twenty-year history.

Taco Bell Boycott Gains Momentum

Publicity about the existence of modern-day slavery and human trafficking helped buoy the Taco Bell campaign and bolster CIW's claims that something was awry in the

⁴³ Bowe, 106-7.

heartland of Florida's tomato industry. During their 2003 Truth Tour and ten-day hunger strike, over fifty farmworkers and students fasted in front of Taco Bell's skyscraper offices. They posed the question to the company's executives, "Can Taco Bell guarantee its customers that the tomatoes in its tacos were not picked by forced labor?"⁴⁴ Taco Bell had no answer. The CIW and its growing number of allies around the country found their silence and lack of accountability unacceptable. After all, Taco Bell's parent company, Yum Brands, had a policy that protected the rights of animals in their suppliers' operations, yet they could not ensure humane treatment of farmworkers.

The boycott took off among students and young people, who initiated the "Boot the Bell" campaign on school campuses around the country. They were not only indignant about the sweatshop conditions of farmworkers, but also by the money spent on a slick twenty-two million dollar advertising campaign directed at them, introducing the slogan "Think outside the bun."⁴⁵ A marketing document released by Taco Bell revealed that their target audience was eighteen to twenty-four year-olds and cynically referred to them as "the new hedonism generation."⁴⁶ This offended young people who took issue with a shallow depiction of them as unconcerned about ethical issues and easily coaxed into eating cheap chalupas by a talking Chihuahua (a Taco Bell mascot at one time). Students mobilized and formed their own network, the Student Farmworker Alliance (SFA) to coordinate their efforts. They organized rallies and forums, initiated letter-

⁴⁴ Coalition of Immokalee Workers, "About CIW."

⁴⁵ Coalition of Immokalee Workers, "Taco Bell v. CIW – The Virtual Debate," Handout, obtained 24 January 2006.

⁴⁶ Elana Berkowitz, "They Say Tomato, Students Say Justice," *Common Dreams.Org*, 18 March 2005, available from <http://www.commondreams.org/views05/0318-30.htm>; Internet; accessed 18 July 2006.

writing campaigns, staged sit-ins, protested at Taco Bell outlets, and participated in rolling fasts. Between 2002 and 2005, twenty-two high schools and universities removed or blocked Taco Bell restaurants and sponsorships.⁴⁷

The boycott also gained momentum in the religious community. Many national denominations and faith-based organizations formally endorsed the boycott, and notable religious leaders took public action in support of the CIW's campaign. Countless congregations and people of faith took up the cause of the Immokalee farmworkers during the Taco Bell Boycott. The participation of the religious sector on so many levels led one long-time labor activist and analyst to conclude that the "church was the secret weapon" in the campaign.⁴⁸ The next chapter will detail the nature of that involvement and its impact.

Students and religious allies⁴⁹ were not the only ones who embraced the Taco Bell Boycott. The CIW demonstrated real flare for amassing a broad array of support that included labor activists, anarchists, human rights organizations, Chicano/Latino groups, hip-hop artists, dignitaries, and celebrities. Musicians Tom Morello (former guitarist of Rage Against the Machine) and Bonnie Raitt, former U.N. Human Rights Commissioner Mary Robinson, actress Susan Sarandon, UFW co-founder Dolores Huerta, authors Wendell Berry and Eric Schlosser (*Fast Food Nation*), and Kerry Kennedy (daughter of the late Robert Kennedy) were among the large number of supporters. Lucas Benitez

⁴⁷ Student Farmworker Alliance, "SFA: Who We Are," Handout describing the organization, obtained 24 January 2006.

⁴⁸ Leary, "Take Down Taco Bell."

⁴⁹ While these groups are not mutually exclusive and there is overlap, (i.e., students who are people of faith and members of religious bodies) they generally tended to be distinct constituencies, and were regarded as such by the CIW.

acknowledged that the CIW's Taco Bell campaign seemed unique in uniting these "diverse sectors of society who don't always get together." He expressed hope and excitement about the energy and the breadth of the movement. While hesitant to make too bold a statement, he said it brought to mind the Civil Rights Movement:

We aren't there yet, but there is a revival afoot. And we are creating part of that... with the vision that we have that is wide enough to include everybody.... This isn't just a fight for us agricultural workers... it is a fight to truly change an industry... that continues being the shame of this country.

Nearly a full four years into the boycott, Taco Bell's parent company saw the writing on the wall. The CIW was in the middle of their 2005 Truth Tour with two busloads of workers caravanning through thirteen cities on their way to Louisville, Kentucky, the home of Yum Brands headquarters, when its executives agreed to meet the demands of the CIW. On March 8, 2005, at a joint press conference, Yum Brands Senior Vice President Jonathan Blum signed an agreement "to work with the CIW to improve working and pay conditions for farmworkers in the Florida tomato fields."⁵⁰

The victory was historic in many ways. It is significant that a corporation entered into a legal settlement with a non-labor union. It is the first time that a fast-food leader has agreed to directly address the sub-poverty wages paid to farmworkers in its supply chain. Yum Brands agreed not only to increase farmworker earnings from between forty to forty-five cents to seventy-two to seventy-seven cents per bucket—to be paid directly to them by the company. It also agreed to modify its code of conduct to protect the human rights of farmworkers, and to work continuously with the CIW in monitoring and enforcing the agreement. Agricultural suppliers found in violation of the agreement lose

⁵⁰ Coalition of Immokalee Workers, "Victory at Taco Bell."

their right to do business with Taco Bell. Notably, Yum also agreed to 100% transparency for Taco Bell's tomato purchases in Florida, essentially laying bare its records to the CIW. This is no small precedent in the corporate food industry where information about purchasing and suppliers is considered confidential trade secrets. So, while the scope of the agreement may be modest in terms of covering only a select swath of tomato pickers, it "has laid the cornerstone for socially responsible purchasing in the fast-food industry."⁵¹

Summary

The Taco Bell victory is an inspiring contemporary story of David and Goliath. Against all odds, a small organization led by the country's poorest and most vulnerable workers took on the world's largest fast-food corporation and won. The farmworkers from Immokalee managed to organize in a region and industry with a history of entrenched racism and inequality. Their socio-economic conditions remained virtually unchanged from fifty years ago, perhaps even deteriorating in a global economy in which corporate consolidation has contributed to falling wages and sweatshop conditions in the fields. In this exploitive environment, farmworkers came together to fight for better wages and dignity. To date, the CIW has virtually stopped the physical abuse of workers and the wage theft that had been rampant, won industry wide wages for the first time in almost twenty years, and helped put the issue of slavery on the national radar. Its Taco Bell Boycott was not only a landmark victory in the realm of corporate responsibility, but also a beacon of hope for the labor movement, and a model for generating a vibrant social movement.

⁵¹ Coalition of Immokalee Workers, "About CIW."

Now we need to examine how it happened and what contributed to victory in order to glean lessons for future campaigns. The next chapter will explore the role that congregations and the faith community played in the CIW campaign for higher wages, and explore why in fact the church may indeed have been “the secret weapon” of the Taco Bell Boycott.

CHAPTER 3

THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS ALLIES

Introduction

The second chapter gave an overview of the dismal conditions under which farmworkers live in Southwest Florida and some of the political and economic factors that perpetuate and exacerbate their exploitation. Understanding this context of social marginalization allows us to grasp the significance of the emergence and success of the CIW. Within a few years, the CIW helped change the climate of fear and powerlessness that prevailed in Immokalee; in less than ten, it moved from waging a local wage struggle against growers to spearheading a national campaign against a corporate giant. Rev. Richard Walsh, a local UCC minister active with the CIW for eight years, marvels that a small group of people from the margins successfully challenged the entrenched powers of the fast-food industry. He exclaimed, “It is a miracle right here in our backyard!” With a hearty laugh he added, “We should build a shrine!” Then, with absolute sincerity, he reiterated, “It really is. That’s for me what it is....It gives me real hope.”

This third chapter offers some explanations for the miracle. Specifically, it focuses on the role that religious allies and faith communities played in supporting the CIW. This chapter is divided into two sections. Part I traces the roots of religious involvement from the inception of the CIW, explains the emergence of a regional religious solidarity network, and shows how their collaboration helped produce a

successful organizing strategy that would prove instrumental in the boycott. Part II outlines why churches might have been called the “secret weapon” of the Taco Bell Boycott. It outlines how they participated and contributed to the victory. Overall, Part II shows that congregations constructively influenced the campaign by: 1) giving national endorsements, 2) providing access to strong organizational networks, 3) mobilizing resources, 4) offering hospitality, 5) offering symbolic and emotional resources, 6) engaging in shareholder activism, and 7) reframing the debate.

Part I: Roots of Religious Support

While the role that religious allies played in the Taco Bell Boycott from April 2001 through March 2005 is a focus of this thesis, it is important to recognize that their support of the CIW was not born “*ex nihilo*” with the onset of the boycott. Roots of religious support were planted at the inception of the Coalition. As noted in Chapter 2, the Coalition began operating out of the local Catholic parish, Our Lady of Guadalupe. The directors and staff of its nonprofit social service agency, Guadalupe Social Services (GSS), faced the impact of systemic poverty on the workers daily, and many were eager to lend support to any organizing drive. In conjunction with farmworkers and staff of Florida Rural Legal Services, GSS staff helped plan, host, and facilitate the initial planning and community meetings out of which the CIW grew. The church was the home base for organizing activities until the CIW gained enough stability to acquire its own office in 1996. In fact, the church’s support became a source of community controversy during the worker strike of 1995 when the growers referred to the Catholic church as “strike central” in the local press.¹ Thanks in large part to a grant by the Catholic

¹ Greg Asbed (CIW staff member), e-mail message to the author, August 1, 2006.

Campaign for Human Development (CCHD), the Coalition was able to become an autonomous organization. GSS, which became a branch of Catholic Charities, continued to support the CIW's organizing efforts through paid personnel: they hired trainers from Mexico in popular education to help develop the leadership component of the CIW, and they dedicated a staff-person half-time to support the Coalition.

However, it was not until the thirty-day hunger strike initiated by six members of the CIW on December 20, 1997 that broad religious support for the CIW blossomed. The stark images of migrant farmworkers fasting during the Christmas season quickly grabbed the attention of the local and national press. Previously, many in the nearby coastal communities of Southwest Florida had never paid attention to their inland neighbors. The simplicity of the workers' request that the growers meet with the farmworkers to open a dialogue about wages was compelling to a great many Floridians. One Naples attorney said he was amazed that "these growers have allowed these poor people to starve, go hungry, on Christmas Day when all they ask is to talk."² The growers' refusal to engage the workers, causing the hunger strike to stretch for weeks, distressed many people. The editorial pages were peppered with letters like this one:

It is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore the plight of the migrant workers here in the Naples area. This is an open plea to the tomato growers of Southwest Florida to sit down with their workers and address their concerns (as one grower, Gargiulo Inc., has already done)...How can the rest of us continue to keep our silence? I don't know about you, but it's impossible to pickup the *Naples Daily News*, read about these workers' hunger strike—and not be affected. In the name of our common humanity, speak up. Let our voices be heard!"³

² Bill Rogers, "Three Remaining Fasters Pass Health Check," *Naples Daily News*, 16 January 1998.

³ Sally L. Schaupner, "Gnawing Concerns," *Naples Daily News*, 10 January 1998.

Religious leaders stepped up and added their voices to request a dialogue. Two weeks into the hunger strike, St. Ann's Catholic Church in Naples hosted an ecumenical worship service, which was attended by about six hundred people, to pray for negotiation and reconciliation between the farmworkers and growers.⁴ On January 9, local Roman Catholic Bishop John Nevins visited the workers in the company of the Archbishop of Baltimore, Cardinal William Keeler. The third week into the hunger strike, Bishop Nevins celebrated a Mass with five diocesan priests at St. Peter the Apostle Parish in Naples in honor of the six strikers. Hunger-striker Pedro Lopez voiced his appreciation of Bishop Nevins' support saying, "It gives me strength to keep going forward."⁵

The fast stretched into week four, forcing two more fasters to stop due to serious health risks. But three continued, waiting for the call from the tomato growers to say they would meet with the workers. Communication did come, but not from Florida's farmers. The Coalition received an unexpected letter from ex-president Jimmy Carter offering to lend his support to negotiations between the two sides. Confident that the growers would come to the table at the bequest of such a respected dignitary (and former grower), the Coalition decided to end their strike. The workers broke their fast on Day Thirty with the reception of the Eucharist at a special Mass said by Bishop Nevins. Brother Jim Harlow, a former director of GSS, says the memory of the service still moves him:

There was standing room only. It was so moving. The Bishop talked off his notes [extemporaneously]. He spoke about his own experience as a son of an immigrant mother. He remembers that his mother had a hard time finding work when she came to this country from Ireland and even encountered signs that said "Catholics need not apply." So, he was very sympathetic. It was a very emotional talk!

⁴ Rogers, "Three Remaining."

⁵ Gina Edwards, Michael Peltier and Marc Caputo, "Strike Not Affecting Production, Says Spokesman for Growers," *Naples Daily News*, 6 January 1998.

Religious Leaders Organize

The hunger strike was an awakening for many. The walls rendering the immigrant community of Immokalee invisible from the rest of southwest Florida were torn down. “Snow birds” and permanent residents alike came to recognize the migrant workers as their neighbors. Growers, for the first time in recent memory, were subjected to public scrutiny, making people think about the conditions under which their fruit and vegetables are picked and to question the power dynamics in the agricultural industry. As CIW staff member Greg Asbed stated, “The genie is out of the bottle.”⁶ Many local clergy and laity were spurred into action. They unified under the name Religious Leaders Concerned (RLC), which convened in March 1998, led by an ordained Baptist minister and psychotherapist, Dr. Rhea Gray, and attended by thirteen persons. In support of the CIW, RLC’s main focus was to address the workers’ wages, since that is “the engine which drives Immokalee’s systemic poverty.”⁷

They embarked on a public education and communications campaign to increase pressure on the growers, who had rebuffed Jimmy Carter’s invitation to dialogue. Quickly, they jumped into organizing a letter-writing campaign among the religious community, sending more than five thousand letters to faith leaders throughout Florida

⁶ Jean Palombo, “Anatomy of a Strike,” *The Florida Catholic*, 12 January 1998.

⁷ Religious Leaders Concerned, Flyer/Program for educational seminar on 5 December 1998 that includes a profile of RLC; The minutes from the meetings of RLC during its first eighteen months reveal ongoing discussion and debate about the specific mission and goals. Some members aspired to go beyond the wage issue in pursuing justice for farmworkers (i.e., addressing literacy, affordable housing, and health), and considered incorporating direct service with workers. (The RLC profile also mentions their interest in tackling “other issues of social justice” in the future). Others thought RLC should focus on the priorities and campaigns of the CIW, which were geared around securing higher wages. Yet amidst debate, the activities in their first year reflect a commitment to addressing wages and exposing the imbalance of power between workers and growers.

urging them to join the call to growers for wage negotiations.⁸ Letters to the editor ensued, as did formal meetings with editorial boards of local papers regarding skewed reporting of the farmworker issue. The RLC sponsored a Weekend of Prayer in the churches of Southwest Florida, May 15-17, 1998, and inaugurated the first “Pilgrimage to Immokalee,” attended by clergy, area labor leaders, pastoral ministers, and state legislators. The pilgrimage, which became a staple activity of the RLC, included prayer, presentations by the CIW, a walking tour of the town, and a shared meal with farmworkers. The RLC was eager for people to understand first-hand the reality and depth of exploitation.

The RLC was explicit that their activities were not designed to elicit charity. This message is clear in their “Open Letter to the People of Southwest Florida” which they sent to hundreds of religious leaders and which was published in at least two local papers:

Through the years, the response of the religious and charitable communities to the pervasive poverty resulting from this reality, has been incredibly generous. We’ve annually raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for the poor of Immokalee. Though it has been needed and was blessed of God, it has, in the final analysis, been a form of corporate welfare to the giant farm corporations that enabled them to avoid paying their workers a wage they can live on and kept in place the socio-economic phenomenon of systemic poverty in which the rich keep getting richer and the poor keep getting more destitute.⁹

The goal of their organizing was to enlist citizens in the task of changing the socio-economic structure. They were certain that people of faith and good will would answer this call once they understood the “truth of the situation,” which the RLC argued had been distorted by the tomato growing companies through their lobbying agent, the

⁸ Jill Higgins, "Religious Leaders Launch Campaign to Help Farmworkers," *Naples Daily News*, 12 July 1998.

⁹ H. Rhea Gray and Rev. Robert Tabbert on behalf of Religious Leaders Concerned, "Open Letter to the People of Southwest Florida," *Naples Daily News*, 12 July 1998.

Florida Fruit and Vegetable Association (FFVA), who “continued to issue false and misleading information to the media, the Governor, and everyone else about the workers’ incomes, the growers’ profits, and most other related issues.”¹⁰ Toward that end, the RLC organized an educational seminar entitled “The Working Poor in Immokalee—An Inquiry into the Systemic Poverty in Immokalee,” attended by about three hundred people, and helped sponsor a symposium entitled “The Church and Social Justice: An Interfaith Conference on the Biblical Basis and Theological Mandate for Action on Social Justice Issues” that focused largely on migrant farmworkers. The RLC also engaged in political advocacy to stop grower-sponsored legislation expanding a guestworker program.

The RLC’s first year was marked by a flurry of activity from a core group of about twenty to twenty-five faith leaders who were initially driven by a belief that they could help bring about a breakthrough with the growers. Yet, a year into their work of prayer, pilgrimages, public education, and pressuring politicians, the growers had not budged. This gave the RLC reason to pause. Damara Luce, who first worked with the RLC as a staff member of Catholic Charities, and then as its paid coordinator from 2001-2005, notes that this reality was a sobering one: “They thought it could change faster.” RLC founder Dr. H. Rhea Grey agrees: “One of the big learnings for me was what a tight-knit closed system the growers had and how politically connected they were.”

The realization that the task was a much larger and longer one than expected exacerbated some latent tensions and divisions regarding the purpose of the RLC (see footnote above) as the group settled in for the long haul and incorporated as a nonprofit organization. While remaining committed to addressing the wage issue, some questioned

¹⁰ Ibid.

whether that should be the exclusive focus of the RLC. It seemed that headway might be made on other fronts for farmworker justice. To reevaluate one's mission in light of one's progress is probably the natural process of growing for any movement or organization. But I flag it here because it merits some reflection in terms of religious allies' roles, which I will address later. However, the RLC did incorporate in 2000 and commit itself to supporting the agenda of the CIW, though the numbers in the core group tapered off a bit after 1999 and educational events aimed at local residents decreased. Yet, this reflects also a shift in priorities of the CIW in 2000 as they put more energy into raising awareness and confronting powers outside Immokalee.

When the third general strike launched by the CIW in December 1999 again failed to bring the local growers to the table, they went to their power center (the growers' lobby), the FFVA headquarters, in Orlando, Florida in February 2000, to which I alluded in Chapter 2. The RLC proved instrumental in creating this 234-mile "March for Dignity, Dialogue and a Fair Wage." They helped plan and execute the walk, activating their religious networks to provide food, lodging, and logistical support during the fifteen-day venture for at least fifty core marchers.¹¹ Catholic Charities staff member Damara Luce worked full time to coordinate logistics and marshal resources. RLC board member and volunteer with the National Farmworker Ministry, Dorothy Turner, utilized long-established networks of farmworker support committees in southern and central Florida for help along the way. The RLC launched a donation drive through

¹¹ For example, the Catholic Diocese of Venice Office of Peace & Justice sent a memo to the parishes in the region expressing Bishop Nevins' support for this farmworker organization and urged them to support the workers in whatever way possible. Neil D. Michaud, Memo to select parishes regarding farmworkers march to Orlando, 14 January 2000, archived files Interfaith Action, Immokalee.

congregations and those committees to collect clothing, sleeping supplies, water, and snacks. These are just some examples of the ways the RLC helped garner much-needed resources and tap faith communities outside Immokalee, making it possible for the CIW to bring the farmworkers' cause to the rest of Florida. In a letter to the RLC, CIW staff expressed their appreciation:

The march, which in most important respects was a great success, was in large part the joint production of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers and the Religious Leaders Concerned...So much of what had to be done to make the march a success could only be done in English and through contacts rooted most firmly in the RLC. Our experience of working together, our understanding of the goals we have in common, and the personal relationships that have grown up among CIW and RLC members over the past couple of years of fighting together, all came into play, allowing us to pull off an incredibly efficient operation moving untold resources across 230 miles of towns, cities, and wide open spaces....¹²

In fact, this march was the prelude for the RLC's support of the CIW during the Taco Bell Boycott and its national mobilization of the religious community when it was announced a year later on April 1, 2001.

For the RLC, which changed its name to Interfaith Action of Southwest Florida (IA) in 2001, the national focus the CIW's campaign assumed meant that local/regional activities diminished. However, those affiliated with the RLC turned toward working in their own denominational and organizational networks to support the Taco Bell Boycott. Importantly, in July 2001, they also hired IA's first full-time coordinator, who became one of the engines that galvanized and coordinated religious involvement around the country for the Taco Bell campaign.

¹² Coalition of Immokalee Worker staff members to friends at the Religious Leaders Concerned, TL, 15 March 2000, archived files of Interfaith Action, Immokalee.

Assessment of Early Religious Support

This narrative of the RLC/IA activities in conjunction with the CIW provides the context and rationale for the decision to boycott Taco Bell. It also shows the role religious allies played in the CIW campaign for higher wages at the local and regional level. From these early years, we can distill at least three important roles that the religious sector played, as well as a philosophical reflection.

First, the local Catholic institutions actually played the role of “midwife” to the Coalition.¹³ The local Catholic church and its social service agency Guadalupe Social Services helped birth the organization by providing office space, staff support, expertise in leadership development, fiscal sponsorship and access to grant monies. A long-time CIW staff member, Greg Asbed, confirmed that “GSS was crucial to the CIW getting traction and taking off.”¹⁴ As the new organization grew and engaged in confrontational and controversial actions, the support of Bishop Nevins, in terms of pastoral ministry and political advocacy, helped boost morale and lend credibility. Of his support, Asbed states,

[H]e was the first major religious leader to recognize the CIW and the role the CIW could play in giving workers a voice in the agricultural industry....His vision and understanding of our struggle were absolutely invaluable in blessing us with his unqualified public support and so giving us...a legitimate place in both the local and national religious communities that would have been very difficult to establish without him.¹⁵

¹³ Sociologist Christian Smith points out that movements are not self-begotten and are usually constructed with assistance from established organizations who play an “indispensable role in facilitating that movement’s emergence” by lending their “financial resources, leadership abilities, building facilities, legal advice, organizational sponsorships, membership lists,” etc.. He calls these organizations “movement midwives.” See Christian Smith, *Resisting Reagan: The U.S. Central America Peace Movement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 109-110.

¹⁴ Greg Asbed, e-mail message to author, 1 August 2006.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Second, according to the CIW, the RLC served as an invaluable “bridge to the world outside of Immokalee.”¹⁶ Through educational and religious forums, pilgrimages, political advocacy, and media work, the RLC helped to not only broaden local religious and community support for the CIW’s cause, but also to spread information to the rest of Florida. While their collective efforts did not yield the long-sought negotiations from growers, the RLC’s activities did raise the visibility of the campaign for higher wages and increased the political leverage of the CIW.¹⁷

Third, through their partnership with the CIW on the march to Orlando, the RLC helped develop the model for the “Taco Bell Truth Tours”—the cross-country caravans—that became the CIW’s signature organizing tool during the boycott. The work of the RLC and their broader religious networks provided the scaffolding on which the Orlando March and later Truth Tours were built. Certainly, the march to Orlando emerged from CIW’s vision and was fueled by the determination and sacrifice of farmworkers who marched for two weeks and forfeited their paychecks. However, the journey to Orlando was made possible through the RLC’s actual organizing and was the fruit of joint collaboration.

In tracing the formation and development of the RLC, the question of how to be an ally also emerges. Above, I alluded to some of the tensions that became more pronounced in the first year when the initial public education blitzkrieg did not bring the

¹⁶ Coalition of Immokalee Workers, “What the RLC has meant for CIW,” Letter of support to RLC, undated, archived files of Interfaith Action, Immokalee.

¹⁷ The RLC had helped secure and/or participated in meetings with Gov. Jeb Bush and Florida Congressman Porter Goss’s Chief of Staff Cheryl Wooley. They also exerted pressure on Senator Bob Graham and other members of Congress to call for the deletion of guestworker legislation from the Senate Appropriations bill (S2260), which was successfully dropped in October 1998.

growers to the table. Some leaders questioned the exclusive focus on seeking higher wages. Broadening the mission to include issues of farmworker housing or health seemed compelling and possibly more productive. As success remained elusive, questions arose about the tactics and strategies of the CIW as well as the mission of the RLC. Partially at stake was the religious leaders' own sense of efficacy. RLC board member Dorothy Turner, who has extensive experience organizing communities to support farmworkers, explains that it is often a challenge for the largely white, upper middle-class, educated religious allies to follow and not lead or create their own agenda:

Our responsibility is to share our own power—political, economic and social—with people who haven't achieved it yet. This means you have to give up more than you get, in the sense of organizing in a way that supports the workers needs out of their own initiative. And this is where the breakdown usually comes in most support organizations. We think “this is what you should do.” But...you have to have enough faith to let people make their own decisions, their own mistakes...and to be servants.

Turner was schooled in the model of “servant ministry” that was espoused by religious leaders in the California Migrant Ministry (CMM). CMM later integrated into the National Farmworker Ministry formed in 1971, which served farmworker communities and became allied with César Chávez and the UFW movement. Activist and author Pat Hoffman describes the servant ministry of the CMM as “giving up the authority to decide how to help farm workers and vesting that authority in a farm worker organization.”¹⁸ Essentially, the RLC went through that discernment process and re-dedicated itself to work designed to support the CIW's agenda, though some members fell away.¹⁹

¹⁸ Pat Hoffman, *Ministry of the Dispossessed: Learning from the Farm Worker Movement* (Los Angeles: Wallace Press, 1987), 101.

¹⁹ I am not suggesting that philosophical differences in ministry is the sole or even primary explanation for decreased participation in 1999 and 2000. Many of the RLC members were very busy

In sum, the early Catholic institutional support of GSS helped give birth to the CIW; the local and regional ecumenical organizing of the RLC/IA and support of Bishop Nevins served as a bridge to the outside world; and the RLC helped create the model for the “Taco Bell Truth Tour” which proved to be a successful organizing tool in the national boycott. It is to that national boycott that we now turn.

Part II: Religious Involvement in the Taco Bell Boycott

The relationships and networks built with and through the RLC formed the initial springboard from which broader networking in the religious community was launched. The RLC (hereafter referred to as IA) members and affiliated religious allies pushed their denominations at the national level to support the Taco Bell Boycott. Through these national endorsements, the religious community became more involved in the campaign. The Taco Bell Boycott gained such momentum in the faith community that one Floridian newspaper asserted, “The Taco Bell boycott has garnered more religious support than perhaps any social activist cause in recent years.”²⁰ This support played a significant role in securing the road to victory. CIW staff member Joaquín Zavala agrees, “The churches have been very influential in the campaign. I am not going to say it is the main reason for the executives to settle, but it was certainly one of the most important ingredients.” This section concretely identifies the religious community’s influence on the campaign.

clergy and pastoral ministers with many responsibilities related to their own congregations and simply could not sustain the high level of activity that characterized the RLC’s first year.

²⁰ Sharon Tubbs, “Church Bells Ring in Boycott,” *St. Petersburg Times*, 1 December 2003.

National Endorsements

In July 2001, just three months after the CIW declared the boycott, the UCC became the first religious denomination to endorse the boycott on the national level. Rev. Noelle Damico, who advocated for the resolution on behalf of the Justice and Witness Ministry of the UCC, notes that such a quick mobilization through the decision-making bodies is “pretty astounding. Three and a half months is highly unusual.” This could occur because members of IA were active in the Florida Conference of the UCC and were able to move swiftly in bringing the resolution to the UCC state conference. From there, they sponsored it at the national General Synod. Rev. Noelle Damico believes this action was important in that it set a precedent that made it more acceptable and easier for other denominations to follow suit.

The Presbyterian Church U.S.A. (PC) did so a year later in June 2002 at its General Assembly. This grabbed people’s attention since it is generally considered a more moderate and “mainline” denomination as allies of various religious denominations commented. The role that Florida allies from the Tampa Bay Presbytery played is worth noting. Active with migrant workers through the faith-based organization, National Farm Worker Ministry (NFWM), they became involved with the CIW through IA’s outreach efforts during the CIW’s march to Orlando. NFWM was also one of the earliest endorsers and was actively engaged both before and during the boycott.

The boycott support accelerated in religious circles in 2003. The Disciples of Christ, the American Friends Service Committee, and the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. (NCC) all endorsed the boycott. The NCC, with its thirty-six Protestant, Anglican, and Orthodox member denominations, represented fifty million

people. In May 2004, the United Methodist Church gave their support, adding the symbolic backing of another eight million. National peace and justice organizations of the Catholic, Unitarian Universalist, Episcopal, and Buddhist persuasions also signed on.

The national endorsements of these denominations proved strategic in key ways. First, the debate and passage of the resolutions for endorsement by national assemblies helped to raise awareness and to increase visibility of the Taco Bell Boycott inside the religious denominations, as well as in the broader community as each one generated publicity. Second, these official endorsements also facilitated outreach and access to local churches and religious organizations during the CIW “Taco Bell Truth Tours.” Most significantly, the endorsements lent legitimacy to the grievances and organizing strategies of the CIW. CIW members acknowledged that the boycott became harder to dismiss with the support of the churches behind them. CIW staff member Lucas Benitez asserts, “When churches unite...and add their voices to the campaign that we have initiated, the credibility is much stronger. No longer is it just a group of students and workers wanting to make noise. It is something that is taken seriously.” This is evidenced, too, by the difference in response from Taco Bell and Yum Brands executives. They had never replied to letters from the CIW asking for dialogue about unjust wages. Yet, when the PC notified Yum Brands of their endorsement of the Taco Bell Boycott, company officials responded immediately, sending letters to the leaders of the PC General Assembly, calling the boycott decision "a mistake."²¹

²¹ Jerry L. Van Marter, "Taco Bell Boycott to Start on Labor Day," *Presbyterian News Service*, 23 August 2002.

Strong Organizational Networks

Scholars of social movements have long sought to identify key social factors and forces that create and sustain social movements. One of the necessary ingredients for movements to emerge and succeed is the existence of strong organizational infrastructure and networks. “Institutionalized networks of communication, decision making, and action” are needed to “facilitate the mobilization and deployment of protest.”²² They are especially essential for the recruitment of new members to a movement since “mobilization does not occur through recruitment of large numbers of isolated and solitary individuals. It occurs as a result of recruiting blocs of people who are already highly organized and participants.”²³ Thus, the structured nature of organized religion proved to be an asset in the Taco Bell campaign. Churches served as “feeder organizations,” those that “fortify the organizational strength of a movement by serving as a conduit that channels an ongoing supply of new members to the movements.”²⁴

This function is perfectly illustrated by the following story that was relayed in an e-mail aptly titled “The Ripples” sent to IA staff by Mary Holland. As a director of religious education, Ms. Holland took a youth group and four adults on an immersion “mission trip” to Immokalee for spring break in 2002. Ellen Wright, an adult participant, was so moved by the experience that she shared her photos and stories about the lives of migrant farmworkers with colleagues at a convention of the state’s dioceses. She urged them to participate in the Taco Bell Boycott. In response, the women at this convention

²² Smith, *Resisting Reagan*, 109.

²³ Anthony Oberschall, *Social Conflict and Social Movements* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1973), 125 cited in Doug McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency 1930-1970*, Second ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 45.

²⁴ Smith, *Resisting Reagan*, 113.

took the issue to their Councils of Catholic Women throughout the state. At a subsequent convention, Ms. Holland received this report from one of the women:

We took our information back to our parish and the Social Concerns committee decided they wanted to do something to make a difference. Father talked about it at all the masses and encouraged us to boycott Taco Bell. Each parishioner was given a postcard with a penny attached and the message asking for a penny more a pound be paid for tomatoes in Florida to help the migrants receive a fair wage. All these post cards were put in a large box painted red and shaped like a tomato and sent to the corporate offices.²⁵

This anecdote highlights the layers of networks and organizational structures built into the religious community—youth groups, committees, conferences, worship services—which served as forums to educate and recruit new participants in the boycott.

Mobilization of Resources

Notable about the Taco Bell campaign, as I mentioned in Chapter 2, is the fact that it did enjoy a diverse array of “*conscience constituents*,” such as students, organized labor, and human rights advocates.²⁶ Adherents of the Resource Mobilization theory have documented the practical importance of these *constituents* or third party supporters who do not stand to benefit directly from the movement’s accomplishments, but support the movement by providing important resources such as authority, moral commitment, money, or labor which contribute to its viability and success.²⁷ Religious congregations

²⁵ “The Ripples,” E-mail sent to Mary Holland, 15 May 2002, archived files of Interfaith Action, Immokalee.

²⁶ See John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald, “Resource Mobilization and Social Movements: A Partial Theory,” *American Journal of Sociology* 82, no. 6 (1977): 1212-1241.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 1220 and Oberschall, *Social Conflict*, 28.

were particularly well equipped to provide these because of their strong organizational infrastructure, social legitimacy, economic resources, and ethical framework for giving.²⁸

Since I allude to legitimacy and material donations elsewhere, here I highlight only labor. The national endorsement by the PC was significant because they allocated funds for a part-time position to promote the boycott within their denomination. The Rev. Noelle Damico (an ordained UCC minister) became the Taco Bell Boycott Coordinator, serving as liaison to the CIW and the PC. IA continued to fund a coordinator, Damara Luce. She worked full-time on recruiting and educating religious allies across the U.S., while also coordinating logistics and mobilizing resources for the national and regional Taco Bell Truth Tours. The faith-based non-profit Interfaith Worker Justice in Chicago also sponsored summer interns to work with IA in Immokalee.

But even beyond paid staff, what stands out in the boycott is the labor from the “people in the pews” who got involved in raising consciousness and escalating pressure on Taco Bell. My interviews with fifteen religious allies revealed multi-faceted participation. Directors of religious education developed curricula on farmworker conditions and corporate responsibility, a church youth group made a TV ad about the boycott for their local cable station, parishioners built artistic displays in church foyers for the designated Farmworker Sunday, clergy and laity fasted with farmworkers during their hunger strikes, congregations organized postcard drives to Taco Bell executives, and a Presbyterian elder impulsively leafleted a Taco Bell outlet during his lay-over at an airport. This elder, Julio Hernandez, stressed that it was the religious allies around the

²⁸ For an analysis of students as “conscience constituents” see Jane M. Walsh, “Migrant Mobilization: Factors Contributing to the Success of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers” (Masters Thesis, Duquesne University, 2005).

country, “hundreds of anonymous people,” doing their small, perhaps mundane part in the campaign that ultimately tipped the scales.

Hospitality

As I mentioned above, the annual cross-country Taco Bell Truth Tours (2002 - 2005), as well as multiple regional tours, constituted one of the primary organizing strategies of the CIW. These national educational caravans transported between fifty and one hundred farmworkers from Immokalee to the Taco Bell headquarters in Irvine, California, stopping in about a dozen cities along the way. This strategy relied overwhelmingly on the hospitality of churches and religious networks around the country. They cooked meals, provided lodging in church basements, classrooms or offices, and secured shower facilities. For example, just during the Truth Tour’s six days in Southern California in 2004, five churches, a convent, and a retreat center provided food, housing and showers, and five faith-based groups contributed donations for food.

While it is true that food and lodging might fall into the category of “resources” outlined above, I believe “hospitality” merits its own category, for it suggests the qualitative dimension to the way that churches and religious allies very often engaged—and were asked to engage. The food and lodging included important elements of welcoming, hosting, and serving that are embodied in the ethical mandate rooted in Scripture to “welcome the stranger” and “feed the hungry.” One worker marveled that the churches would greet and host “even when we arrived at 3:00 a.m.” IA staff member, Damara Luce, recalls that congregations would go out of their way to ensure the CIW members felt comfortable, remembering that in at least four different churches, they even opened up the sanctuary to the workers to sleep as they felt the benches and the carpet

there were more comfortable than the cement floors elsewhere. Moreover, the churches were not just spaces for the workers to eat and sleep. The workers were received and integrated into the congregational rituals of the church, speaking during worship services, at church committees, and youth groups.

That is not to say that all churches were *a priori* fully supportive of the CIW's mission. Some were uncertain about the organization's aims, had doubts about the constructiveness of boycotts, and/or were "nervous about hosting over fifty farmworkers" according to Luce. For some, reaching across well-established boundaries of race and class was a new experience. Yet, it was these exchanges that Luce believed were "so powerful," though not always comfortable. For example, she recalls that during a march to Tallahassee to confront the Governor, the CIW stayed in the parish of Governor Jeb Bush. The pastor was visibly uncomfortable with the arrangement, but had been asked to host the farmworkers by the Florida Catholic Conference. This, too, illustrates that it was often the ethic of Christian hospitality that allowed these exchanges to take place. In the case of Governor Bush's parish, hospitality trumped political loyalties.

Symbolic & Emotional Resources

The contribution of churches and religious leaders went beyond leveraging money, staff/volunteers, lodging, or publicity. Less quantifiable, but arguably as important, is the role they played in providing symbolic and emotional resources during the Taco Bell Boycott. In making this point, it is helpful to know that most of the farmworkers involved in the CIW are Christian, with a majority raised in the Roman Catholic tradition in their countries of origin. I will explore the faith of the workers in greater detail in Chapter 4, but for now, I merely want to emphasize that the presence and

participation of bishops, priests, ministers, and religious institutions was significant for a great many of the workers. Religious leaders' involvement and their use of Christian rituals and symbols affirmed the sacred meaning of the struggle.

Religious rituals were integrated most visibly in the national Truth Tours. The CIW established a tradition whereby each Truth Tour began with a ceremonial blessing by Bishop Nevins of the Diocese of Venice. After a hearty breakfast, the Bishop blessed the buses and the workers and prayerfully sent them on their journey. Many congregations that hosted the farmworkers also organized services and likewise sent the caravan to its next destination with prayers. During the 2003 Truth Tour in Southern California, ten clergy from different denominations conducted an ecumenical/interfaith service and commissioned the farmworkers and allies who were undertaking a fast in front of Taco Bell headquarters until they secured a meeting with executives.²⁹ At the service, those present sang and prayed Scripture, listened to the words of Martin Luther King Jr. and César Chávez, and to workers' testimony. Sociologist Christian Smith notes the importance of these ceremonial elements in bolstering social movements:

Social movements need symbols, rituals, narratives, icons, and songs. They use these to construct their collective identities, to nurture solidarity, to express their grievances, and to draw inspiration and strength in difficult times.³⁰

It is evident that workers and allies drew considerable strength and sustenance from the religious leaders and symbols that accompanied them during the ten-day fast in Irvine. Participants characterize it as a time of trial, camping outside corporate headquarters in unseasonably cold and rainy weather, facing harassment and hostility from the Irvine

²⁹ Over fifty workers and allies participated in the ten-day hunger strike which the CIW says is the largest in U.S. labor history.

³⁰ Smith, "Bringing Religion Back," 11.

police, and many suffering respiratory infections. Several fasters were hospitalized. Each night of the fast, workers gathered for a candle-light prayer vigil and local clergy prayed with the workers and fasters. Rev. Noelle Damico participated in these events and captured the transformation that occurred in an on-line journal she maintained:

Wed., Feb. 26, Day 3 of the Hunger Fast:...At 7:00 p.m. Pastor José Marti from Gethsemane Presbyterian Church comes to preach and pray with the workers...He eloquently reminds everyone that “with God, all things are possible.” He likens the struggle of the farmworkers with Taco Bell to that of David and Goliath. The contrast is vivid. The workers are haggard and exhausted; weak in body but not in spirit... José’s preaching is strong and the word of God comes alive. The workers cheer and pray and then they begin to step forward to offer their own prayers. It is an incredible testimony. We are all strengthened.³¹

In speaking of the fast and the long struggle for higher wages, one worker said the churches “helped us to continue on.” Another recounted the boost he received when a pastor announced a letter expressing support from fifty million Christians: “It made us strong.”³²

Rev. William Moore, whose congregation hosted the CIW, recalled the intense experience of the hunger strike. He described a powerful worship service when the CIW ended their fast with the breaking of the bread. He says, “I was honored to be a participant, to be one of the people to give communion to a small group of the workers. Some of them literally sat down and wept after that. And I wept too.” Notably, the workers chose to end their fast on Ash Wednesday. They were encouraged to end the fast not because they had achieved their stated goal of meeting with Taco Bell executives, but

³¹ Rev. Noelle Damico, “Hunger Strike Journal,” available from <http://www.pcusa.org/oga/perspectives/april03/hunger.pdf>; Internet; accessed 10 September 2006.

³² This most likely is a reference to the letter that the National Council of Churches (NCC) sent on February 25, 2003 expressing their support and pastoral concern for the workers engaging in the fast. The letter indicates that its thirty-six Protestant and Orthodox member communions have 140,000 congregations across the country to which fifty million Christians belong.

because many religious leaders sent letters of support and concern. A letter from Roman Catholic Cardinal Roger Mahony of Los Angeles proved persuasive in ending the fast. He wrote, “I urge you to conclude this fast. In turn, I encourage Catholics to stand with you by fasting during Lent as a sign of solidarity with you and in prayer that you soon see a successful conclusion to this campaign.”³³

These stories give testimony to the way in which rituals and accompaniment by religious leaders provided validation, hope, and sustenance to those in the struggle. It is important here to recognize the symbolic and emotional resources that the churches provided and to acknowledge the fundamentally human dimension of social activism. As sociologist Sharon Erickson Nepstad contends, more traditional social movement frameworks (i.e., Resource Mobilization theory, Political Process model) neglect or “tend to downplay the human elements of protests” and emphasize the objective structural conditions that hinder or help mobilization.³⁴ She argues that the role of emotions, beliefs, values, and meaning systems of activists merit greater attention as they are also important factors in accounting for the emergence and viability of a movement. Pursuing her insight, I would argue that congregations and religious allies played a significant role in the Taco Bell Boycott by attending to the emotional and spiritual needs of those involved. They helped tap the moral meaning of the struggle and to boost morale.

³³ Cardinal Roger Mahony, Los Angeles, TLS, to members of the CIW, 5 March 2003, archived files of Interfaith Action, Immokalee.

³⁴ See Sharon Erickson Nepstad, *Convictions of the Soul: Religion, Culture, and Agency in the Central America Solidarity Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 11.

Shareholder Activism

Religious networks were also largely responsible for organizing investors to pressure Yum Brands to take responsibility for the conditions in the tomato fields of Florida. The fact that the UCC held stock in Yum Brands through its pension and endowment funds allowed the UCC to participate in shareholder meetings and to pressure the company to consider the ethical treatment of farmworkers in its business practices. So, the UCC Pension Boards; the Center for Reflection, Education and Action (CREA); Trillium Assets Management (TAM); and other institutional investors sponsored a resolution calling on Yum Brands to “report on labor and environmental conditions throughout its supply chain and to prepare a long-range plan for integrating sustainability objectives throughout company operations.”³⁵ The PC also urged all Presbyterian Yum Brands’ shareholders to sign over their proxy to a farmworker so they could be authorized to participate. Outside the boardroom, religious allies joined students, unions members, and small farmers to stage protests. Some dressed up as animals to highlight the “double-standard” that Yum Brands “required meat suppliers to treat animals humanely while refusing to ask their tomato suppliers to treat workers fairly.”³⁶

In 2003, the shareholder resolution garnered an impressive 43% of the votes. Yum Brands did not publicly disclose the results of the vote at the annual meeting, suggesting that it impacted the company. Shelly Alpern, Assistant Vice President of TAM remarked, “In ten years of doing this work, I’ve never heard of a company not releasing preliminary

³⁵ “Yum! Brands, Inc. Shareholder Resolution: Frequently Asked Questions,” Factsheet produced by the Presbyterian Church, May 2004, files of Interfaith Action, Immokalee.

³⁶ Evan Silverstein, “Yum! Hears from Taco Bell Protesters,” *Presbyterian News Service*, 16 May 2003, available from <https://www.pcusa.org/pnews/oldnews/2003/03242.htm>; Internet; accessed 4 September 2006.

voting figures at a stockholder meeting.”³⁷ For her, this constituted “practically a victory” in a proxy contest. In 2004, over 30% of the investors again voted for the identical resolution. During that shareholder meeting, the Yum Brands Chairman and CEO, David Novak, actually made an offer to support an industry wide surcharge on Florida tomatoes if other buyers would go along, and if the CIW would call off its boycott first. The CIW rejected this as an unbinding and “hollow” gesture.³⁸ Yet, it shows that the shareholder actions and the larger boycott campaign were taking their toll.

Reframing the Debate

Allies inside and outside of the faith-community repeatedly asserted that the religious presence in the struggle helped to reframe the debate. Instead of focusing on the economic bottom line, the focus became ethical behavior. Tracey Robinson, a non-religious ally³⁹ who worked closely with the CIW for almost three years told me,

I think the way in which the companies understand what they were doing was changed by the message that the faith community brought. I really think the faith communities have the particular ability to convey the way in which these business decisions are moral decisions.

That may be rooted, in part, in the moral authority that is perceived or ascribed to churches. However, this campaign revealed that much of the reframing was simply about taking the boycott from the intellectual or theoretical realm to the personal, through direct interaction with farmworkers. Religious networks provided the forums for the CIW

³⁷ Shelly Alpern, “Indigestion From Yum! Brands,” March 2004, available from http://207.21.200.202/pages/news/news_detail.asp?ArticleID=327&status=CurrentIssue; Internet; accessed 10 August 2006.

³⁸ Evan Silverstein, “Farmworkers Spurn Taco Bell Offer,” *Presbyterian News Service*, 24 May 2004.

³⁹ The term “non-religious ally” refers to those who worked with the CIW in support of the campaign but represent another sector or constituency. It is not a description of their religious belief.

members to share their experiences and perspectives—through worship services, adult education forums, coffee-socials, etc.—and thereby helped transform the boycott from a “political issue” or “labor dispute” to one about human beings and dignity. Rev. William Moore, whose congregation hosted the farmworkers during two Truth Tours in California, said the personal connection made the difference: “We had people we could see and touch, and a chance to get in touch with our heart.”

CIW staff and allies suggest that the corporate campaign got *very* personal in Louisville, Ky. in 2005. While it may not have been a “heart connection,” the boycott touched Yum Brand employees by penetrating their social circles—their churches, their children’s schools, and their neighborhoods. After three Truth Tours ending in Irvine, California, the CIW realized that it was really Yum Brands “who had the power,” as one IA staff put it. So, the final destination and target for a mass mobilization became Louisville, the headquarters of Yum Brands.⁴⁰ Yet, Louisville is also the headquarters of the PC which had played a lead role in the boycott, facilitating and participating in negotiations between Yum Brands and the CIW. Thus, the “conflict” between Taco Bell in California and farmworkers in Florida now became an intra-community affair.

The churches became the primary staging ground for encounter, as CIW and IA staff organized months in advance of the Tour’s arrival. Unlike in Southern California, where the CIW had access to multiple colleges and universities, in Louisville, they relied heavily on churches. Farmworkers became the guest speakers at religious services or forums. Yum Brand employees—who would not otherwise meet people impacted by their company’s practices—shared space with them on Sundays. For example, in one

⁴⁰ Previous Truth Tours had included Louisville as a stop, but the primary target had been Taco Bell’s executives, and thus organizing constituencies in Southern California.

Catholic church, a Yum Brands manager showed up to a participatory CIW-led presentation. He had the opportunity to hoist the standard thirty-two-pound bucket of tomatoes up and over his shoulder, simulating the repetitive action of pickers throwing buckets up to the truck. Rev. Noelle Damico asserts, “These executives would not have been confronted in any other part of their lives with the kind of direct challenge they got from within their congregation.”

The activity of local churches also challenged the credibility and image of Yum Brands as an upstanding corporate citizen. One Baptist church in Louisville in 2004 had received a generous charitable donation from Yum Brands for their soup kitchen. In a rather dramatic move at a public demonstration outside of the company’s headquarters in 2004, the pastor signed the check over to the CIW stating that the company’s first priority was justice and that charity could not make up for what they owed to the workers.⁴¹

While the 2005 Truth Tour was in progress, and just two days before it was scheduled to arrive in Louisville for a week of activities from March 6-12, weeks of intense negotiations between Yum Brands and the CIW yielded an accord. Yum agreed to the demands of the CIW. On March 8, 2005, the four-year boycott officially ended.

Summary

In this chapter, I have shown how congregations and religious allies engaged in the CIW boycott of Taco Bell and contributed to that campaign’s success. I began by outlining their role in the years preceding the boycott, revealing how the local religious leaders, through the formation and activities of the RLC, provided a crucial bridge for the

⁴¹ Rev. Noelle Damico, e-mail message to author, 9 August 2006.

CIW to the world outside Immokalee. The RLC paved the way for the extensive national denominational support that proved instrumental during the boycott. In addition, the RLC helped develop and make viable the organizing model of the Taco Bell Truth Tours that became the CIW's signature organizing tool. I then outlined seven ways in which churches and religious allies strengthened the organizing, helping to secure a successful outcome.

However, as significant as the religious allies were to the campaign, even they believe that the organizational strength came from the vision, commitment, and creativity of the farmworkers themselves. The religious allies consistently emphasized that they took their lead from the CIW, drawing inspiration from the tenacity and unwavering faith of its members. It is to those workers and their convictions that we turn in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4

THE FAITH OF THE WORKERS

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I explored how religious organizations and allies engaged in the CIW's fight for dignity and higher wages at the local and national levels. I identified the myriad of ways that congregations and their members participated in the boycott and how they leveraged their networks and resources to influence the campaign. But as sociologist Richard Wood argues in his book on faith-based organizing, "religion matters as *religion*, not just as a source of legitimacy, money, or social capital."¹ Thus, in this chapter, I will address how religious faith personally affected the CIW members. I will show how the robust faith of the workers, rooted in Latino popular Catholicism, served as a cultural resource that prepared workers to engage in the CIW campaigns. Their religious paradigm disposed and equipped them to participate in the Taco Bell Boycott by providing them with transcendent motivation, giving them strength and solace, and yielding a palpable expectation of victory.

Background of CIW Members

When I embarked on my research, the religious profiles and beliefs of the farmworkers was largely unknown to me. I had some general presuppositions that many

¹ Richard L. Wood, *Faith in Action: Religion, Race, and Democratic Organizing in America*, ed. Alan Wolfe, Morality and Society Series (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 273.

of the workers had been raised in and/or were influenced by Catholicism, given their cultural/national origins are primarily in Mexico, Guatemala, and Haiti. However, my impetus for researching the CIW had more to do with the solidarity of the churches and the success of the movement overall. Yet, I wondered if the religious faith of the workers might have been a factor in eliciting support from Christian churches and if it influenced their own activism. To answer these questions, I conducted in-depth interviews with thirteen CIW members—eight general members and five staff. I sought recommendations from IA as to who might be good candidates to interview, based more on their active involvement with the Coalition than extensive knowledge of their religious profile. Also, some of the farmworkers referred me to their friends and colleagues. I asked questions about their personal involvement with the CIW, their religious background and activity, and their experience and assessment of collaboration with the religious community. Six members in my sample hail from Mexico, six from Guatemala, and one from Cuba. They have been in Immokalee from one to fourteen years, with the average time approaching six years.

Of the thirteen I interviewed, eleven were raised Catholic, one was mostly raised in a Pentecostal church after his family left the Catholic church when he was young, and one was raised in the Mayan tradition. Ten of the twelve Catholics still identified themselves as such, though one qualified that with a critique of the policies and politics of the Church, but maintained he was a believer. One had renounced Catholicism, and was exploring non-denominational Evangelical Protestantism. All in my sample professed a belief in God. To the question of whether their faith was something important

to them, all thirteen answered affirmatively, and most quite emphatically. Their “Yes” was quickly reinforced with explanations such as those sampled below:

“I think it is important for all human beings. It is the center of our being.”

“It is a fundamental base for whatever goal you want to achieve.”

“Of course! You have to have faith. You have to remember God.”

“It [faith] has served me a lot! I have often fallen, but through faith and God, one is rescued... One must love God over everything else. God is the ultimate.”

“I ask God and the next night, I have a dream for an answer. God guides me.”

“Yes, it’s important. But I’m not that religious, like people who pray all the time.”

Nine of the workers interviewed indicated that they participated in worship services at the local Catholic church as their work schedules allowed. Several lamented that working six-day schedules—which often included Sunday—prohibited regular attendance and more active involvement in the church. One worker expressed his desire to volunteer his time and energy in the parish doing catechesis. He, and three others I interviewed, had participated in and helped coordinate youth ministry or faith formation in their home countries of Guatemala (3) and Mexico (1).

But more interesting than official practices or Sunday churchgoing tendencies was how they interpreted their faith Monday through Saturday. The workers with whom I spoke saw their faith as connected to their involvement in the mission and campaigns of the CIW. When I directly asked the workers if they saw a relationship between their faith and the work of the CIW, ten of the thirteen responded yes. Notably, even when three others initially answered no, they went on to elaborate the connection that they saw. For instance, Antonio Vásquez, a worker from Mexico, had this to say,

The CIW works in the material realm, and God works in the spiritual realm...So, it is different...But while we are on this planet, we are going to fight because God sent us here so that we could work. Both to work and also to remember God.

He then referred to the work of the CIW in freeing those trapped in slavery and suggested that, like God, they were doing salvific work. He asserted that “the Coalition is with God.” Another worker exclaimed without hesitation that there was indeed a “very deep” relationship between his religious faith and the CIW. But for us to grasp this connection, it is necessary to explore their understanding of God and religious vision.

Dios El Luchador: A God Who Fights for Justice

There was nothing ethereal about the God who emerged in interviews with workers. Far from being an impartial judge detached from this world, God jumped into the earthly ring fighting for the poor. One CIW staff member shared this interpretation of his Christian faith:

God sent him [Jesus] to be with the poor so that he could help better the lives of His people. So, all of us, as children of this God, as brothers and sisters of this Christ that came here to earth, have to continue to do the same, bettering the lives of us poor people. And now we ourselves have to be the poor ones fighting on our own behalf. So, it is the Catholic faith, I tell you, that teaches us that Jesus was a fighter, that he liked justice and sought justice for the most marginalized. Thus, it is this kind of people that I believe God wants to see, a people defending their rights and a people that does not allow themselves to be stepped on.²

He understands Jesus’ life activities and purpose to be exposing and arresting injustice.

CIW staff member and co-founder, Lucas Benitez, regards the story of Jesus driving the moneychangers out of the Temple (Mt. 21:12-13) as one of the most beautiful parts of the Bible and sees it as fundamental for revealing who God is. For him, it shows that God is not a “conformist” and does not condone or submit to exploitation.

² Transcripts from interviews done in 2005 for documentary film on the role of religious allies in the CIW, still in production, produced by Ron Schmidt (Los Angeles: Arrupe Productions, Inc., [2007]).

This understanding of God is affirmed seasonally on the corporate level within the CIW. CIW staff member Rafael Huerta reported that during the weekly community meetings that take place around the Christmas season, the birth of Jesus is related to the CIW's struggle. The CIW staff facilitators reiterate that it was among the poor that God was born. They first ask the workers why Jesus was born, and then, why the Coalition was born. Invariably, the answer is to fight for the rights of workers. Mr. Huerta believes that there is a natural relationship between the religion of the workers and "*la lucha*."

This connection also gets expressed in sketches or "codifications" that are used as flyers handed to workers and posted around town. Codifications are artistic creations that "re-present" reality in such a way that people who view them begin to reflect on that reality in a different light.³ They are consciousness-raising tools that expose political/social realities and help to spark dialogue during meetings.⁴ In his analysis of codifications developed by the CIW, researcher and long-time ally Brian Payne found liberation theology to be one of three consistent themes that are expressed in the sketches. Essentially, they restate the mission of Jesus Christ to liberate the poor and oppressed. This is explicitly rendered in two sketches that Payne describes (see Appendix C):

The first "liberation theology" sketch (picture 1) shows a picture of Jesus speaking to a grower. Jesus says, "I came here to proclaim justice and to liberate all men from oppression from one another." The grower answers, "I only want all the money for me!" Below is written, "This is how it is, friends. Although the churches are supporting our struggle, the crewleaders are turning a deaf ear. United they will have to listen! —The Coalition.

³ Brian Payne, "Taking Back the Reins of Identity Formation: The Evolution of a Grassroots Organization in a South Florida Migrant Farm Working Community" (Masters Thesis, University of Florida, 2000), 93.

⁴ Using such visuals is standard practice in popular education methodology that is employed by the Coalition which I alluded to in Chapter 2.

The second “liberation theology” sketch (picture 2) states, “Remember friend, during this Christmas, how was Jesus born?” Below are two drawings. One shows a baby sitting on a giant throne. Under this drawing is written, “like this, in a golden throne, like a rich person?” The other shows the nativity scene: baby Jesus in a manger with Mary and Joseph kneeling and praying beside him. Under this drawing is written, “Or like this, in a humble manger and a poor family.” At the bottom is written, “He was born poor, to save the poor and give faith and hope for a more just world! Merry Christmas from the Coalition. *He who fights is not dead!*” [italics mine, reflects my modification of translation]⁵

Authentic Faith Demands Action

Related to the concept of a God who fights the good fight is the religious understanding that authentic Christian faith manifests in concrete action to challenge injustice. It is a matter of following Jesus according to Joaquín Zavala, a worker from Mexico forced to migrate as a result of the adverse effects NAFTA had on his local economy. He puts the question this way:

If you ask yourself the question what would Jesus do if he or she would come...to earth again...Would he go to the church and pray for the people who are suffering? Or would Jesus go and take action? I think that answer is obvious. And I think that no one argues that.

A worker from Guatemala, Diego Chávez, pushes the imperative for action even further. He suggests that action for justice is not just mandated by one’s Christian faith, but constitutes religious faith itself. He explains,

I believe that it is something important that we believe ourselves to be involved, no matter what religion one is. Rather, what matters is to change a bad situation. And also to change the mind of religion. Because religion should not just be about existing Sundays, or giving weekday religious services, so that one can cry. What good does it do if you cry when the world, when other people, are in need? What does it serve to worship, what does it serve to talk, if you don’t act?

For Mr. Chávez, it matters little what service you attend or religion you profess. Action to stop suffering and exploitation is what is important. In terms that would be familiar to

⁵ Payne, “Taking Back the Reins,” 96-97.

liberation theologians, he articulates the primacy of orthopraxis over orthodoxy.⁶

Essentially, correct action matters more than right faith or creed. And for Diego Chávez, we see that action is the criteria for a real, credible religion.

The CIW Campaigns: A Religious Endeavor

With a pervasive image of God as one who fights for justice and demands equivalent action from his followers, it is understandable why many workers see the work of the CIW as intrinsically connected with their faith. Sergio Rodriguez, a worker from Guatemala who had been involved with the CIW for just over two years, believes that his religious faith and the CIW struggle are virtually synonymous: “They are equal. The church wants a better world, and the Coalition is the one making it so, fighting for a better country, a better world...I think it is really the same, faith and the organization [CIW].” Similarly, Gustavo Martinez thinks the pursuits of the CIW reflect his own religious aspirations: “I see that, in reality, my own faith and what I believe, and what I want for all workers and for all human beings, is that which the Coalition wants.”

Staff member Joaquín Zavala also approached his involvement in the CIW campaigns with prayerful deliberateness. He believes religion is not something externally imposed, but rather, it “comes from inside of you,” and is demonstrated “by the actions that you take every day.” He elaborates,

When I think about religion, I am not pursuing holiness. I am simply trying to go day by day and to look at how my choices affect other people. And I see that the work and tasks I do is almost like a religion. The justice that we [the Coalition] are seeking relates to those outside of Immokalee. We are trying to make it possible for *all* people to live in dignity. And if Jesus were here, he would contribute to the struggle.

⁶ For an explanation on how orthopraxis relates to orthodoxy, see Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, trans. Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson, rev. ed. with a new introduction (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988), xxxiii-xxxv, 8.

For Mr. Zavala, one of three workers who did not identify as Catholic, his faith and the CIW's work are not separate streams that coincide, or coalesce. Rather, he sees his involvement with the coalition as a religion.

Impact on Participation

Having ascertained that most sampled CIW members were raised and still participate in the Catholic tradition,⁷ that all profess belief in God and affirm the importance of faith in their lives, and all saw their involvement in the CIW as connected to their religious faith (albeit in varying degrees and ways), I will describe how their faith facilitated participation in the CIW campaign and buoyed the Taco Bell Boycott.

Distilling the role and impact of faith is difficult because it is impossible to isolate religious faith from the social context and forces that shape it. Christian Smith testifies:

For this reason, in explaining social movements, it is simply impossible to separate the religious factors of belief and practice from more mundane matters of wealth, power, and prestige. All of these elements of social existence interact dynamically and mutually, and can have combined and reinforcing effects in generating disruptive social conflict.

It is common, therefore, to find that religion is one of a complex of factors that propel and facilitate social movements. Oftentimes, religious cleavages align with class-, political-, and status-cleavages. The results are social movements that involve an amalgamation of religious, political, status, and social-class grievances.⁸

⁷ Even beyond the fact that the workers in my sample were raised Catholic and most still attended mass, Hispanic theologian Roberto Goizueta argues that “one cannot be Latino without having a Catholic background” given that the “Latino culture and Catholicism have deep, historical links.” Referencing the work of Justo González, he goes on to say that “Catholicism has had a pervasive and profound influence on Latino *culture per se*, in much the same way as Protestantism has had a pervasive and profound influence on U.S. culture” in Roberto S. Goizueta, *Caminemos Con Jesús: Toward a Hispanic/Latino Theology of Accompaniment* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 8,10. See also Justo González, *Mañana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1990).

⁸ Smith, “Bringing Religion Back,” 7-8.

I point this out in order to clarify and qualify my claims. Below, I am arguing not that faith was the exclusive or driving force that motivated and sustained participation, but that it proved to be a powerful contributing factor.

Transcendent motivation. First, I contend that the CIW members' understanding that God endorsed their struggle helped motivate and sustain their participation. Importantly, this idea was corroborated by the presence and participation of the religious leaders and organizations. Felipe Solorio, a worker from Mexico, acknowledged that although he was originally a little fearful and skeptical about the organization, he was enticed to come to a CIW function because the local Bishop was going to hold Mass. He recalls, "It interested me more that the Bishop would participate." This connection made him receptive to the CIW and helped motivate his subsequent involvement in the boycott activities. He saw that the CIW was about "*la lucha*" to get a "fair salary and a life with dignity." In colorful slang, Mr. Solorio linked the purpose of the CIW to God's divine mission of uplifting "*todos los jodidos*" (all those screwed over), among whom he counts himself. Yet, it is this religious vision that helps him feel and associate value and self-worth to being among the lowly.

The view of a justice-seeking God helped workers sense that they were participating in and helping to fulfill God's divine mission. It helped imbue the Taco Bell Boycott activities with a greater sense of purpose and a deeper sense of meaning. This is evident in the words of one CIW staff member who, upon reflecting on the campaign, shared that he saw the engagement of religious people, workers, and students as a "reflection of God's will." He explains:

What I mean is that every human being, every person, has a piece of that God within them, that God of justice, and we just need to wake it up. You can turn

around to see, now that the Boycott is over, all the people that during the marches we had, would give us a glass of water or a bottle of water. Those people that maybe thought that they didn't do much, did a lot, because that was the sign that God was with us, because He was giving us the water that we needed. Everyone who came out with a sign that said "Keep Going," all of those are signs of love and signs that He really does want you to keep going, that you're not alone."⁹

This testimony reveals how the Taco Bell Boycott was largely construed as a sacred struggle. It was not just about "a penny more per pound" and a code of conduct in the fields for this member, though it was that too. It was also about acting on a moral duty to connect people to their true (divine) identity as justice-seekers. This sense of responsibility for awakening people helped to fuel and give meaning to this worker's involvement in the campaign.

Strength and Solace. The words above also speak powerfully to a profoundly incarnational understanding of God. God does not simply desire justice or will it from on high, but actively participates in the struggle in and through people.¹⁰ The worker had a genuine feeling of being accompanied and strengthened during the campaign. This sentiment was echoed by other CIW members. In describing how he endured the ten-day hunger strike at Taco Bell Headquarters, Carlos Moreno said frankly, "I think God was there." He added, "We had lots of support from churches, all praying for us." Sergio Rodriguez said that even in difficult moments, "I do not despair. For first, I go and ask God." He shares with God the nature of their struggle and why they are fighting, and asks God to intervene to help them succeed. So, he does not lose hope. In fact he comes away with greater confidence that it is "a fight we will wage until the end."

⁹ Transcripts for documentary film, produced by Ron Schmidt, [2007].

¹⁰ Roberto Goizueta argues, "One cannot understand U.S. Hispanic popular Catholicism without understanding its essentially incarnational and, therefore, relational character: Jesus is not simply a spirit 'out there' or even 'in here'; he is a truly historical, flesh-and-blood man who accompanies us in our lives—as do our families and friends." See Goizueta, *Caminemos con Jesús*, 69.

Expectation of Victory. The notion that workers were engaged in the divinely sanctioned mission of fighting for justice and were accompanied in their struggle helped give them a confidence in their ultimate victory that seemed unflinching. I heard from multiple members of the CIW during the interview process that the salient question in the Taco Bell Boycott was not “if” but “when” they would win. The majority of the workers with whom I spoke expressed great certainty that they would succeed. When asked, “Did you think you would win the Taco Bell Boycott?” only one out of twelve expressed doubt about the probability of winning.¹¹ Two said that they did not think about winning—with one of them clarifying that what mattered to him was the fight. Yet, nine of the twelve gave a prompt and emphatic “yes!” Octavio Rojas answered, “Yes! Always, always!” Gustavo Martinez exclaimed, “Yes, I always had that faith.” Sergio Rodriguez responded, “Yes I thought so. Since the beginning...I felt that we were going to win this campaign.”

One could argue that the experience of victory might sweeten the memory and color their responses. However, I believe that their religious framework is relevant to their confident declarations. In my follow-up question asking why they won the boycott, one third of the workers cited their faith as one reason for success. For example, Mr. Huerta talked about the boycott in this way:

It is something incredible to see a group of workers like the CIW to confront a giant like Yum Brands, one of the largest corporations in fast-food. And a group of workers that is so small. But nevertheless, they took on Yum Brands and put the demands on the table with Yum Brands, and won the changes. It is something incredible that the CIW won this. One never imagined this. But as we were talking about earlier, it is because of faith. If we had not had faith, we would never have had this strength, this sense of worth that each one has inside of them, and we would not have won. But we knew that yes, change was going to happen.

¹¹ Here, the sample is twelve, not thirteen, as one CIW member did not feel inclined to answer the question given his short involvement in the campaign.

In speaking of faith and their victory with Taco Bell, three interrelated themes surfaced. First, faith in God and faith in the struggle were intertwined. Various workers expressed their belief that faith in God was a prerequisite or a catalyst for accomplishments in life, and essential for waging a successful campaign. Lucas Benitez articulates this sentiment. Of religious faith he says, “ I believe [this] is one thing that many of us that are involved in this have. We have faith in the struggle. The same as if you have faith in the Virgin of Guadalupe. You entrust yourself to her so that you can move ahead.” Noteworthy, too, is his parallel between dedication to the Virgin of Guadalupe and to the struggle. Faith in the struggle is not only the fruit of faith in God, but is also a way of paying homage to and trusting the divine.

Second, CIW members credited their victory to speaking the truth, and their use of the term had both pragmatic and transcendent implications. On one level, this meant speaking from their own experience and sharing the harsh reality of their lives and working conditions. Simultaneously, it was about exposing the underbelly of the agricultural and fast-food industry. Joaquín Zavala describes how hard it was to know the actual circumstances of farmworkers “and see this corporation trying to put on make-up” through its public relations. But even in the face of denial and media spin, he argues that the power of the campaign came because the workers “still have the truth.” Mr. Zavala relayed the profound impact this truth-telling had on people as the “cruel reality” was rendered visible by the workers. He described instances that sounded like “Amazing Grace” moments where individuals wept upon hearing presentations by workers and confronting their own complicity. In speaking their truth, the workers, in effect, were bringing revelation. “Truth” at times suggested or signified a cosmic or divine force.

Lucas Benitez also asserted that “the truth” and faith in their truth was at the heart of the victory: “Like one of our sayings that King [Martin Luther King Jr.] taught us, ‘the strongest weapon that we have is our truth.’” Likewise, Carlos Moreno explained his commitment to the struggle and refusal to be daunted by fighting another global leviathan like McDonald’s in this way: “When one is talking the truth, about what is true, there is no reason to worry.”

Finally, this confidence in the boycott’s success is related to the belief that they were divinely empowered on the path of truth and justice and that God’s will ultimately prevails. Based on my participant observation and interviews with workers and allies, the CIW embodies and effectively communicates the conviction that righteousness will have the final word. And, significantly, the CIW is a part of making that happen. This sentiment is captured in the final lines of a reflection the CIW wrote on the occasion of Martin Luther King Jr.’s birthday, assessing the ten-year journey of the CIW: “As Doctor King also said, ‘The arc of history is long, but it inclines toward justice.’ We know that the future is already written—it only remains to be realized.”¹²

The workers articulated their belief that they are part of fulfilling future’s destiny. Rafael Huerta states, “The workers, as in my case, we have this faith that we are going to change things one day. This is the relationship that I see between faith and the coalition.” Gustavo Martinez feels assured that they can reach their goals because their “faith is going to move mountains.” Carlos Moreno also believed they triumphed in the campaign because of all their allies and their faith: “All is possible with the faith we have. *Sí, se puede!*” Also invoking the example of Martin Luther King Jr. he reiterated, “I believe

¹² Coalition of Immokalee Workers, Reflection on CIW history written on the occasion of the birthday of Martin Luther King Jr., distributed at a general meeting on 25 January 2006, Immokalee.

that fighting and working together, we can create a better world.” And he is not alone. Notably, the members and the coalition as a whole convey the hope that they are a part of the process of actualizing this new world. They shared this conviction with their friends in the Presbyterian Church after the victory: “Through the boycott we have been dreaming together, and with God’s help our dreams are becoming possible. When we believe together we can make whatever changes need to be done.”¹³

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have focused on the difference that religious faith makes in the lives of the Coalition members. We learned that their faith is in a God that throws His lot in with the poor, as demonstrated by the humble birth of Jesus Christ. God accompanies and assists those struggling for justice. Moreover, Jesus models the way believers are to engage while on this earth—defending the marginalized and ending suffering and exploitation. Thus, the CIW members believe that any authentic religion is about action.

It is this understanding of God and their religious faith that helped motivate, sustain, and give meaning to participation in the CIW Taco Bell Boycott. Certainly, the workers’ own experience of hardship and exploitation and the effective organizing of the CIW served to catalyze involvement. However, it is clear that their religious faith also equipped the CIW members to engage in the difficult battle for dignity and higher wages. Essentially, their faith, which was largely rooted in Latino popular Catholicism, served as a cultural resource that helped influence and shape their participation. This religious paradigm functioned, as sociologist Ann Swidler would say, as a “tool-kit” from which

¹³ Gerardo Reyes Chávez on behalf of the CIW, “A Letter of Thanks from the CIW” to Esteemed Friends in the Presbyterian Church, [pdf created 7 April 2005], files of Interfaith Action, Immokalee.

the CIW members developed lines of action, or “strategies of action.”¹⁴ Swidler argues that culture is best understood not as a unified system, but rather as a repertoire of “symbols, stories, rituals and worldviews which people may use in varying configurations to solve different kinds of problems.”¹⁵ Thus, culture matters because it shapes the capacities out of which we construct a general way of organizing action—making some options available (i.e., hosting prayer vigils and masses during a prolonged fast), while precluding others. We saw how this religious worldview not only gave workers strength and comfort, but also how it helped generate hope that made them confident in winning the boycott against Taco Bell. It was a hope that saw beyond the immediate obstacles of the great power-differential between a corporate giant and a pocket of farmworkers. In fact, their faith helped them turn that dynamic on its head and to see the power in their own truth and believe that that would ultimately prevail.

But how faith mattered to the CIW members gives only a partial view of the impact of religion in the Taco Bell campaign. The next section will show how the faith of the workers also helped attract, nourish, and transform allies. I will show how religion helped create and shape the moral vision and ethos of the CIW, and suggest it was this moral vision that helped draw and invigorate the array of allies who helped make the campaign a success.

¹⁴ See Ann Swidler, "Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies," *American Sociological Review* 51 (April 1986): 273-286.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*: 273.

CHAPTER 5

RELIGIOUS FAITH: SHAPING THE MORAL VISION & ETHOS OF THE CIW

I think that, to a great extent, you could immediately disassociate it [the CIW] from having any kind of a religious orientation. But, at its core, there are still certain values that come out of the Christian tradition and that relate to the Catholic influence among a lot of the workers.

–Rev. Andrew Madison, religious ally

They have a standard of treating all people with respect, equality and with love....They are somehow able to communicate on that level with people.

–Luís Mendez, cultural artist, CIW ally

The people [of the CIW] who share their own experience don't necessarily preach Bible stuff...but you can't help but to see that they are people of great faith.... A feeling of spirituality is there.

–Dorothy Turner, religious ally

The previous two chapters have told different parts of the story of how religious faith mattered in the Taco Bell Boycott. Chapter 3 examined the organizational contribution of religious groups, while Chapter 4 lifted the curtain to show how faith mattered in the individual lives of the workers. It revealed that most of the workers were steeped in popular Catholicism. They believe in a God who sides with the poor, construe Jesus' mission as justice-oriented, and perceive an ethical mandate to fight for the dignity of all. We saw that their faith motivated them and sustained them, contributing to an expectation of victory that defied most pragmatic assessments of success.

However, there is still more to be said about the importance of religious faith that goes beyond the symbolic and public manifestations. It extends beyond the prayer vigils or blessing of buses mentioned in Chapter 3, and even beyond the personal testimonies of faith articulated in Chapter 4. Of course, this chapter continues to acknowledge the insights of the previous chapter. Chapter 5 is based on the premise that if religious faith mattered to workers, then it mattered in the movement led by workers.

Also, this chapter is inspired by the pull or attraction many allies in the movement alluded to when talking about the CIW. As Catholic ally Susan Foley said, “When we go down there you feel drawn to the people there, the workers and the people who are part of the organization itself.” She said it is like a “magnet.” Of course, the allies readily named concrete elements of their attraction: the strategic organizing, outstanding leadership development, popular education methodology, construction of diverse alliances, their savvy use of media, etc. But frequently they mentioned another dimension—an *ethos*, a feeling, an energy—that stood out as well. Words found in the quotes above include “values,” “love,” “faith,” “spirituality.” Rev. William Moore believes that the CIW “captured people’s imagination.” Even non-religious allies,¹ like labor activist/writer Elly Leary, commented that it was “the deeply spiritual nature of the farm workers themselves” that attracted the church as allies.²

This chapter looks at how religious faith infused, perhaps infiltrated, the CIW-led Taco Bell Boycott. It will show that the religious faith of the workers is woven into the cultural fabric of the CIW, even though it may not be on the label of the secular

¹ Again, I use “non-religious” in specifying other-sector allies, those representing other constituencies than churches. It is not a commentary on their religious orientation.

² Leary, “Take Down Taco Bell.”

organization. I will argue that religious faith both grounds and gives rise to the moral vision, or value preferences, embodied by the CIW and the *ethos* or “feel of life”³ within the organization. While I maintain that religious faith is a cultural strand influencing the moral vision and ethos, it is not the only one. It is not my aim to give a comprehensive analysis of the organizational culture of the CIW. My purpose is to highlight human dignity, community, and sacrifice as three important components of the moral vision and ethos of the CIW. These convictions featured prominently in my interviews with workers, religious allies, and other allies. This chapter will assert that Catholicism as practiced by these predominantly Latino workers informed the core convictions of their moral vision and influenced the tone of the campaigns. Last, I will suggest that the moral vision and ethos were the magnets that attracted and energized many allies.

Human Dignity

I think that they bring it into color in a way that—they make you feel it. It’s not just some abstract human dignity. It’s really the human dignity of real, honest, human persons...I don’t know, it just feels different. –Tracey Robinson, CIW ally

The CIW’s campaign to end sweatshops in the fields is rooted in the basic assertion that farmworkers are human beings, and accordingly, deserve respect and fair wages and working conditions. While this seems self-evident in the twenty-first century, the legacy of an agricultural industry built on slavery and entrenched racism conspires with contemporary forces of corporate consolidation to perpetuate a system of dehumanizing exploitation. Economic and political realities have prevented many in the U.S. from seeing the abuse of those who harvest our nation’s fruits and vegetables. In this context, the CIW has been deliberate in framing the exploitation of workers as a violation

³ Rich Wood, *Faith in Action*, 105.

of human rights. They argue that it is precisely these sweatshop conditions—cultivated by Florida growers and legislation—that allow the more egregious cases of modern-day slavery to “take root and flourish.”⁴ So, while they are fighting for the rights of workers and immigrants, the CIW consciously broadens the discourse to human rights. One IA staff member said they keep the message clear and simple: “Human rights. Human rights. Human rights!”

However, the CIW’s promotion of human rights based on the dignity of farmworkers is more than a messaging strategy. It is a lived conviction born out of their own experiences of suffering and hardship. Antonio Vásquez said he joined the coalition to help end the pervasive violence and exploitation:

Before, the bosses would mistreat us [and] hit us. We worked a lot and they didn’t pay us.... We worked from 6:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., sun-up to sundown. And they beat us and mistreated us. So, with enthusiasm, people united and said we didn’t want this anymore. We wanted fair treatment because the worker also has dignity, as a human being.

While many have been spared physical abuse, the members all know what it is to labor in the sweltering fields of Florida to support themselves and their families back home. Many, in fact, take pride that the work they do is honest and purposeful. Several noted the importance of their role in bringing food to the table of Americans. Carlos Moreno expressed indignation that so many are unaware of their existence and their realities:

I talked to students. They don’t even know what is happening. They didn’t know where their food came from—tomatoes, lettuce, watermelons. They didn’t know! But it is we who pick it and bring it to them! But who knows the conditions—that we are dirty, poorly paid?

⁴ Coalition of Immokalee Workers, “CIW Opinion on Ramos Sentencing,” available from <http://www.ciw-online.org/CIW%20opinion%20on%20Ramos%20sent.html>; Internet; accessed 2 November 2006.

Many workers would like to stay and work in the fields under humane circumstances.⁵

Gustavo Martinez said that he loved working in “*el campo*” (the countryside): “I was born in el campo. I was raised in el campo...and I hope that I die en el campo.”

Second, the inherent dignity of the workers is nurtured and affirmed by the CIW’s organizational culture. Its slogans (i.e., *Todos Somos Lideres / We Are All Leaders, Del Pueblo para el Pueblo / Of the People, for the People*), its popular education, and its organizing methods emphasize belief in the intrinsic value of each worker. They give life to the principle that each person has capacities to develop and gifts to contribute to the struggle. Moreover, the CIW’s flat hierarchy enacts and powerfully communicates the equal dignity of all, while it reflects the slogan that *all* are leaders.

The lived experience of the workers and the principles of the CIW contribute to a firm belief in the dignity of all human beings. Yet, I believe there is another factor that engenders this conviction in many workers: their belief that all are created by God, and all are equal in God’s eyes. This instills self-respect, even while it may be denied them socially and economically in the U.S.. Lucas Benitez says he learned this from his Catholic father who ritually took his children to evening mass (after the Sunday movie matinee) every week. His father taught him always to have self-respect, be proud of the work he does, and never to doubt his dignity. He told him, “You are worth a lot,” even if “we should be the poorest in the land.” His value did not depend on money or status.

Moreover, the God the CIW members know, as we learned in Chapter 4, is a God that *chose* to dwell among “*los jodidos*,” both to reveal their true dignity and to transform unjust social structures which do not honor each person. We recall how the CIW staff

⁵ Most workers in Immokalee try to move quickly out of the fields and into construction or landscaping jobs, as farmwork remains the most poorly paid.

emphasized this message each Christmas season through their drawings showing the humble birth of Jesus in a manger, as opposed to atop a throne. This exercise reiterates the honored place the poor occupy in God’s eyes within the Christian paradigm. This practice both reflects and shapes their understanding that they are worthy and part of God’s plan.

This religious understanding of their human dignity helps nourish their own self-esteem and confidence. Their faith allows them to lay claim to their value and to appropriate it at a deep level. Religious ally Rev. Andrew Madison, an evangelical Protestant active in many civil-rights struggles, said he was impressed with how a sense of their own dignity was pervasive among CIW members. Notably, he largely attributed this to a Christian, and particularly Catholic, ethos underlying the CIW. He explains:

[W]ell most of them [the workers] are Roman Catholics, especially those who are active, are active Catholics. And the Catholic tradition, at its best, has at its core ...this sense of dignity, this sense of worth, this sense of being an important entity in the universe, this sense of being a child of the Creator. All these kinds of things were a part of that core message that they [the leaders of the CIW] articulated to the workers, and I think that was a part of what drew them in....”⁶

The Florida Catholic Conference concurs that the CIW “take[s] to heart the most fundamental moral premise—the dignity of each human person.”⁷ Human dignity is a central tenet of Catholic social teaching. The dignity or sacredness of the human person in the larger Catholic tradition rests on the understanding from Genesis that the human

⁶ Rev. Andrew Madison used the qualifier “Catholic” in different ways during the interview. At times he used it to talk about the Roman Catholic Church and its tradition; other times he used it to refer to its root meaning of “universal,” speaking of the more universal values to which the CIW spoke. But in this part of the interview, he was making reference to the particular Roman Catholic influence he sees on the workers’ convictions.

⁷ Florida Catholic Conference, Text accompanying a gift of a cross from the Florida Catholic Conference for the new community center that the CIW is building in Immokalee, May 2005, files of Interfaith Action, Immokalee.

person is created in the image and likeness of God.⁸ Human dignity is a gift freely given from God to all, and does not need to be earned by human effort or accomplishment.

Just as the leaders of the CIW helped affirm the God-given dignity of every worker, so did the religious allies. The presence and accompaniment of clergy and church leaders in the Taco Bell campaign had special symbolic weight, as they were often seen as signs of God's recognition and presence. But divine mediation aside, their attendance signified respect, visibility, and acceptance from authority figures and mainstream America, groups from whom the workers usually felt contempt, and at best, pity. So, on some level, the workers received the respect for which they were fighting. Rev. Noelle Damico related a story of how, after one of the weekly meetings, a worker approached her with gratitude so profound that it was disarming. With grave seriousness he said:

I know that the Presbyterian church understands what I struggle with every day. Because you haven't come here offering me food, or clothing, or prayers, but you are supporting the boycott. You know that what I need is a decent wage. And I need the ability to make those decisions for myself and for my family. And that is why I would come to this church. Because you respect me as a human being, as a child of God.

There is much to unpack in this passage. It indicts the many charity-focused churches that often do not honor the dignity of workers. But what I want to highlight is just how deeply he was marked by the experience of having the Reverend Noelle Damico treat him the way he believed a child of God should be treated. Religious allies, in partnership with the CIW, helped the workers *know* their own worth by working *with* them. Their alliance helped respect become a realization, not merely an aspiration, along the Taco Bell campaign trail.

⁸ Charles E. Curran, *Catholic Social Teaching 1891-Present: A Historical, Theological, and Ethical Analysis*, ed. James F. Keenan, Moral Traditions Series (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2002), 131-132.

It is clear that the CIW is doing groundbreaking work in the area of human rights. Becoming the first U.S.-based recipient of the Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Award in 2003 testifies to that fact. The framework of the organization—with its fundamental belief in the inherent dignity of all humans—is shaped and textured by the Christian faith of the members of the CIW, and is significant. As IA staff member Damara Luce notes, the farmworkers' faith “is so important for the morale and the spirit behind the human rights work.” It helped them to believe in their own dignity. It enabled them to construe the fight to defend their dignity through just wages and humane working conditions as a sacred vocation. While certainly not the sole catalyst, it is clear that their religious faith, born out of and fertilized by struggle, was one potent factor in empowering the workers. Blended with the organizing philosophy and methods of the CIW, and the accompaniment of allies, the workers came to *live out* their human dignity. I believe this is the feeling to which Tracey Robinson alludes at the opening of this section when she suggests that the CIW brought human dignity “into color” and went beyond an abstract adherence to principle.

That they lived out their own dignity is manifested in how the CIW engaged in the campaign with the executives of Taco Bell. Even in their assertive, incisive, systemic critique of the agricultural and fast-food industry, built on their own backs, the CIW retained a sense of the humanity behind the corporations, and thus the hope for change. The CIW consistently approached the decision-makers with respect, expressing the expectation that Taco Bell would do the right thing. In their first letter to Taco Bell, the CIW wrote, “We truly believe that Taco Bell is a responsible corporate neighbor and that your company understands that conditions like those you will find in the attached articles

are no longer acceptable.”⁹ The CIW waited well over a year, with two unanswered letters and multiple unreturned phone calls, before they moved toward a boycott. Rev. Noelle Damico notes that the CIW sought partnership by “always taking the ‘high road’ and respecting Taco Bell/Yum Brands even at the most trying moments.” She points out, for example, that the CIW never broke confidentiality in an attempt to gain public advantage, even though Yum Brands did so at a very critical moment in negotiations in 2004. Significant, too, is the lack of triumphalism in the way the CIW spoke of their victory. One CIW staff member said of the brokered agreement: “And now Taco Bell and the Coalition are walking together on a journey towards reconciliation and peace...they’ve already declared their responsibility and have taken the lead in watching over the tomato pickers’ working conditions....”¹⁰ The CIW did not revel in their victory “over” a corporate giant, but embraced the agreement as a step toward partnership. Overall, it is this tone of respect and principled conduct in the Taco Bell Boycott that illustrates how the CIW honored their own dignity, as well as that of their “adversaries.” It demonstrates how fundamental human dignity is to the moral vision that animates and guides the CIW.

Community

*What we offer to our adoptive country is, above all, the hope of a freedom grounded in community.*¹¹

⁹ Lucas Benitez, Immokalee, Florida to Mr. Thomas E. Davin (Chief Operating Officer of Taco Bell Corp.), Irvine, California, TLS, 12 January 2000, files of the CIW, Immokalee.

¹⁰ Transcripts for documentary film, produced by Ron Schmidt, [2007].

¹¹ Goizueta, *Caminemos con Jesús*, 17.

A second central value that guides and grounds the CIW is their sense of community. But even this merits some explanation/qualification because the word community has different meanings and implications for people rooted in different cultural contexts. Sociologist Robert N. Bellah and his colleagues in their classic *Habits of the Heart*, which analyzed character and commitment of middle-class North-Americans, argue that the creeping dominance of utilitarian and expressive individualism has greatly limited self-understanding and the conception of community. They write,

But the notion that one discovers one's deepest beliefs in, and through, tradition and community is not very congenial to Americans. Most of us imagine an autonomous self existing independently, entirely outside any tradition and community, and then perhaps choosing one.¹²

Roberto Goizueta concurs and puts it this way: "That is, community is always extrinsic to individuality. Community is at best an addition or supplement to the individual, at worst a threat to and limitation of the individual."¹³ He notes that the modern liberal individual approaches the idea of community with sentimental attachment, associating it with providing a feeling of "emotional warmth."¹⁴ Yet, community is more than a *feeling* and goes beyond mere instrumental therapeutic value.

Hispanic theologians Goizueta and Ada María Isasi-Díaz challenge the understanding of community as "voluntary association" and the individualistic anthropology out of which it flows, which sees individuals as autonomous, self-sufficient beings (or the "socially unsituated self" in the words of Bellah et al). U.S. Hispanic

¹² Robert N. Bellah and others, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985; reprint, First Perennial Library edition, 1986), 65.

¹³ Goizueta, *Caminemos con Jesús*, 60.

¹⁴ Ibid., 63 citing William M. Sullivan, "Bringing the Good Back In," in *Liberalism and the Good*, ed. R. Bruce Douglass, Gerald M. Mara, and Henry S. Richardson (New York: Routledge, 1990), 151.

popular Catholicism operates from a different paradigm. It “presupposes the foundational role of relationships in defining what it means to be a human being—and what it means to be a Christian. The human person is defined, above all, by his or her character as a relational being.”¹⁵ Ultimately, then, community goes to the heart of one’s identity and self-understanding. Isasi-Díaz asserts, “Community is not something we added on, but a web of relationships constitutive of who we are.”¹⁶ Community and the understanding of self are inseparable. The self is embedded in community; the community gives birth to the self. But the idea that individuals can find self-actualization and fulfillment in and through family and community relationships is an idea that is spurned in contemporary American culture. Goizueta sees this manifested in the cultural assumption that “one must at some point (usually in adolescence) leave one’s familial relationships behind in order to ‘discover oneself,’ undergo an ‘identity crisis,’ ‘become one’s own person,’ and achieve one’s own identity.”¹⁷ These cultural differences were apparent to Joaquín Zavala from Mexico who observed, “Here, [in the U.S.] everybody wants to leave and get their independence. There are such different priorities. It has been really hard.” He openly talked about a sense of loss at separation from his family.

Highlighting this cultural distinction is important and relevant for my assertion that it is a sense of community that shaped the moral vision of the CIW. I believe that it was this sense of their own identity as rooted in community (in contrast to the “unsituated self”) that influenced the CIW members’ engagement in and approach to the campaign. A

¹⁵ Ibid., 72.

¹⁶ Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *En La Lucha / in the Struggle: Elaborating a Mujerista Theology*, Tenth Anniversary ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 180.

¹⁷ Goizueta, *Caminemos con Jesús*, 60.

strong sense of devotion and loyalty to family and their fellow farmworkers permeated the movement. Their notion of family and community was notably an expansive one which included those who had come before, and those yet to be born. Rev. Andrew Madison noted that the CIW consistently appealed to “a sense of family” and reiterated that the task of securing a higher wage was “not just about *me*, but about my children and my children’s children.”

That is not to suggest that concern for one’s children is an unusual or atypical catalyst for social change. But perhaps what is surprising is to find that theme so pervasive among an organization of almost all men, many of whom are young, single, and without children. In my sample, this regard for the future surfaced consistently, even though eight out of the thirteen were unmarried and/or did not (yet) have any children. Sergio Rodriguez, a single Guatemalan about twenty-two years old, had this to say when asked what attracted him to the CIW:

I am supporting the struggle. Perhaps it won’t be for me, as I will pass on. But for those who come after me. Maybe my sons, my grandchildren. I want this to change so they don’t suffer and have to endure what is happening.

Lucas Benitez also invoked future generations as a source of strength in difficult moments. He explained that past social movements provided inspiration, as did talking to “Lupe” (Our Lady of Guadalupe, considered the religious and cultural Mother of Mexico). Ultimately, however, it is family that motivates and sustains him: “But more than anything, I think about my parents, and my family, and in this—that what we are doing, we are doing for us, and for those that come after us, for the family of my nephew, and for his son as well.”

The sense of community that guides the CIW involves not just loyalty to family and to the next generation, but also dedication to their community base, their fellow workers. While human rights and dignity is the dominant framework of the CIW, accountability to and empowerment of workers is its hallmark. The CIW takes great pride in being an organization by and for farmworkers. CIW staff is composed of workers elected by their fellow members at an annual general assembly. Notably, to ensure that the staff remains rooted in the farmworker reality, several key organizational bylaws were created: Staff salaries are commensurate with farmworker wages, staff structure is non-hierarchical, and staff members are required to spend significant amounts of time every year in the fields.¹⁸ This distinction of being farmworker-led makes the CIW both credible and exciting to the workers. This is reflected in Joaquín Zavala's comments:

Everything we decide comes from the group and from the community. They are deciding the most important steps on the journey. In this struggle, they, the workers themselves are taking the reins of the struggle, breaking down the barriers, breaking new ground.

However, participating in an organization composed of farmworkers is only one source of communal pride. Non-hierarchical organization is the other. Staff of the CIW distinguish themselves from other worker organizations like unions which leave conventional pecking order intact in the leadership ranks, often using professional "organizers" recruited from outside the membership base. In fact, CIW staff bristle at being called "organizers," as that implies a separation or even elevation from the rest of the workers. They use the term "animators" and see themselves as facilitators that encourage the incipient leadership of their peers. As mentioned above, this flat-hierarchy

¹⁸ Coalition of Immokalee Workers, "Consciousness + Commitment," 355.

is one way in which the CIW honors the dignity of each person, and lives out their conviction that *Todos Somos Líderes*. CIW members Marcelino Sanchez and Joaquín Zavala—echoing the sentiments of so many of the workers with whom I spoke—give testimony to the significance of the egalitarian structure. Mr. Sanchez explains,

We respect everyone. We don't have hierarchies. In other organizations, the only one that counts is the leader. They don't take into account the opinions of others. Here it is beautiful because often there are good ideas that come out. Every person has the opportunity to let out what they are thinking and feeling.¹⁹

Mr. Zavala boasts,

We don't have a boss, someone who says "you do that." We all take on different jobs and also share tasks. It really gives you the freedom to explore inside of you and see what are the things that you can contribute to the struggle. You may find you have skills to speak to people, to organize, to do the radio....We've all had the opportunity to develop skills and creativity is free to flourish in that atmosphere.

The rejection of hierarchy is not only an affirmation of each worker, but also of the community. It elicits the full participation of the whole community and recognizes the varied gifts within its collective body. A deliberate move away from an individualistic model of leadership, the CIW models a communal leadership. The staff each explained to me how there was "nobody over anybody," as one member put it, and how everybody was equal. All contribute to charting the organization's course. Rafael Huerta affirmed, "We work as a team. We meet and analyze the things that are happening, and see what is in front of us. We get together, chat, and discuss how we are going to do certain things."

The egalitarian philosophy and structure of the CIW certainly helps to foster and demonstrate a deep respect and appreciation for the community. It is important to note the community is not seen as something external to the staff and members, whom they "represent." They are immersed in, encompassed by, and accountable to the

¹⁹ Gonzalez, "Awakening the Consciousness," 25.

community—a community that not only includes the other staff and members of the CIW, but extends to their families in Immokalee and their home countries, and the generations that will follow. This relationship defines who they are and their purpose. Long-time ally Dorothy Turner touched on the communal identity that pervades the CIW: “I think there is the attitude that the whole is more important than the parts.”

The CIW bears witness to the fact that the “whole” does not compromise or diminish the importance of the individual, but rather enhances individuality by eliciting each one’s unique contributions. The CIW’s theory and practice challenge the underlying assumptions of many middle-class Americans captured in *Habits of the Heart*, that one becomes truly, deeply oneself by severing or subordinating familial and community bonds. The CIW members—and the allies who work with them—experience (and witness) empowerment and liberation in and through their relationships. Goizueta’s insight about Hispanics/Latinos in the U.S. at the beginning of this section readily applies to the CIW. They “offer the hope of a freedom grounded in community.” This is the vision that guides the Coalition.

Sacrifice

*Sacrifice for the sake of justice is the means by which the truth of human dignity is verified.*²⁰

A willingness to sacrifice captures an important dimension of the ethos of the CIW. Unlike the notions of “human dignity” or “community,” it isn’t something that workers talk about or name—it is something they do. While the workers did not expound on the sacrifices required of them during their four-year Taco Bell Boycott (part of a ten-year campaign for higher wages), their sacrifice did not escape the notice of many of the

²⁰ Frederick Dalton, *The Moral Vision of César Chávez* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), 164.

allies. In various ways and words, they expressed their admiration and respect for the fortitude, tenacity, and endurance of the CIW members amidst the challenges and hardship. One ally who works for social/economic justice on behalf of her national denomination admitted to being moved by them, almost in spite of herself, a seasoned activist. She spoke of a two-hour march through the wintery streets of Chicago without appropriate outdoor gear.

Well, I've got to say, I've been doing this for such a long time, so I'm not going to get bowled over. But you can tell I've been taken by these guys walking there. I've got some pictures of these guys walking with their plastic bags around their shoes through the snow, and just the freezing cold.... And I see them on march after march after march. I'm talking about year after year after year – to hang in there through the four years or so of the boycott. One guy I'm thinking of...the one I have the picture of walking in the snow. And to see him year after year going on these Truth Tours, doing the fast—an amazing amount of work and suffering and pain, just pain, that that kid put up with and engaged in to make this happen is phenomenal.... This was not an easy victory – by no means.

Rev. Noelle Damico also saw up close the personal investment the workers made as she accompanied them as the Taco Bell Boycott Coordinator for the PC:

They don't have a strike fund, when they go, they go without pay for two weeks....They are just utterly dependent on one another...which also means that their families back home lose those wages. Then they take on the sacrifice...of going on a hunger strike. And they didn't know how long it was going to last! Then getting pneumonia. And throwing up in front of Taco Bell Headquarters [during the fast] because you are bearing in your own body, making visible the exploitation in your own body. I mean, I took people to the emergency room during this thing....These men and women *know* what it is to sacrifice.

While allies were effusive about this aspect of the CIW, the workers themselves were matter of fact about the sacrifice required. Various, they mentioned threats of losing their jobs when they participated in Truth Tours, the loss of pay for themselves and loved ones back home, time away from family life in Immokalee, and the challenges of

going without food during fasts. But they accepted this as a natural part of the equation.

To the question of whether there were sacrifices, Antonio Vásquez smiled and said,

Of course. There were sacrifices and risks. But it is in order to gain something. As long as one does not sacrifice, one does not do anything. The first thing necessary to move forward is to sacrifice yourself, so that there are results.... Yes, it is worth it!

For Antonio, it was about standing their ground and gaining respect from the growers and companies. Joining the struggle for justice is a way to verify “the truth of their human dignity.” It is a part of defending and giving to their community. Octavio Rojas, a member with a wife and five children in Guatemala, alluded to his participation in the thirty-day hunger strike. He said casually that he was uncertain whether he would “make it from one night to the next day,” having been hospitalized during the process. But what mattered was that he knew that “one day they would have victory.” He cited his family as his inspiration: “They make me happy to continue fighting—and for the children of the future.”

These comments reveal a practical sense of self-sacrifice as simple necessity for survival, as well as the understanding of its power to renew and give life. There is a way in which the CIW members embraced sacrifice. This acceptance of sacrifice seems inextricable from their religious beliefs and the socio-historical milieu of Latino popular Catholicism that imbues sacrifice with meaning and purpose in light of Jesus Christ. Given the reality that Latino popular Catholicism emerged from marginalized peoples and was “molded by the experience of vanquishment,” Orlando Espín notes that Latinos have tended to emphasize Good Friday and the cross, not Easter or the Resurrection.²¹ He

²¹ Orlando O. Espín, “The God of the Vanquished: Foundations for a Latino Spirituality,” in *The Faith of the People: Theological Reflections on Popular Catholicism*, with a foreword by Roberto S. Goizueta (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 22.

explains that the cross reflects and speaks to the reality of Latinos in the U.S. who know all too well the experience of poverty, oppression, and/or marginalization. He points to the prevalence of the graphic depictions of the suffering Jesus throughout Latin America over the centuries. He writes,

Latinos give the iconography of the crucifixion a very realistic quality. The crucified Jesus is painted or sculpted to appear in horrible pain. The crown of thorns, the nails, the blood, all are made to communicate real suffering, real torture, and real death.²²

Importantly, this tortured image of Jesus on the cross does not correspond with defeat. Rather, it consoles as it conveys “compassionate solidarity with suffering men and women.”²³ Ultimately, it communicates the “transformative power”²⁴ of a life given in loving service to the cross, an act that conquers the powers of death.

Notably, although I did not see any depictions of a tormented Jesus on the walls of the CIW, the organization does in fact have their own bloody icon: a blood-stained shirt of a worker. It is the shirt off the back of a Guatemalan tomato picker who was badly beaten by his crew boss after asking for a drink of water in 1996, which I described in Chapter 2. This incident galvanized the community and five hundred workers marched to the crew leader’s house that night and boycotted his fields the next day—actions that effectively ended physical abuse as a general practice in the fields of Immokalee. This story essentially serves as the founding narrative of the CIW. Several workers told me

²² Orlando O. Espín, “Tradition and Popular Religion: An Understanding of the *Sensus Fidelium*,” in *Faith of the People*, 72.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Eduardo C. Fernández, *La Cosecha: Harvesting Contemporary United States Hispanic Theology (1972-1998)* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2000), 52.

this story, and it is recounted in various articles and retold at community meetings.²⁵ The CIW staff keep the relic in a filing cabinet drawer and pull it out for general meetings and bring it with them to presentations. I don't want to overstate its religious symbolism, but the parallel to the bloody crucifix is striking. Similarly, the blood-stained shirt bears testimony to the reality of suffering and exploitation of farmworkers. Yet the shirt also symbolizes the strength and redemption of the workers who united to confront and defeat the powers of industry. It also embodies the sacrifice required to join the struggle for justice.

But their commitment to the cause and willingness to sacrifice does not come at the expense of humor or levity. One way in which they confront and cope with the hardship and challenges they face is to poke fun. Certainly, they used comedy and caricature in their drawings or “codings,” street theater, signs, and videos, where they took license depicting the growers as fat-cats out of a Monopoly game, or giving Taco Bell's talking-Chihuahua mascot features of a blood-sucking vampire. However, I don't want to point so much to their publicity or tactical arsenal, but to their own internal dynamics or practices. There is one refrain the CIW members use which captures the organization's ethos regarding sacrifice: “*Qué es eso?* / What is that?”

Its meaning was revealed during a chillingly cold demonstration in front of McDonald's headquarters where everybody was drenched and chattering.²⁶ All were regrouping in the parking lot, planning the next activity, when members from the local church offered to take workers and allies there to get warm and change into dry clothes.

²⁵ See for example Gurwitt, “Power to the Pickers.”

²⁶ This demonstration was part of the CIW's new McDonald's campaign. So, while not part of the Taco Bell Boycott, it is relevant to draw upon in terms of revealing the ethos of the CIW.

Suddenly, a worker yelled out “Que es *eso*?” Others echoed the refrain, inducing much boisterous laughter in the ranks of workers and allies. This question, “What is *that*?” was their way of claiming that they did not even notice being cold or wet. It didn’t even register. This has come to be used as a call-and-response during stressful times. A staff calls out, “Are you hungry? Are you tired? Are you thirsty? The workers sing out “What is *that*?” This phrase encapsulates much of the spirit of the CIW—their deep commitment and willingness to make sacrifices with humorous defiance despite suffering and hardship.

It seems clear that this resilience in large part is fueled by religious faith. It is a faith that refuses to let suffering have the final word or to eclipse joy. It is rooted in the recognition that “*la vida es la lucha*: to struggle is to live.”²⁷ And ultimately, there is meaning in the struggle because first and foremost, life is a gift from the Creator. Second, the struggle for justice honors God, as the life of Jesus demonstrates. These convictions are implicit in the words of Carlos Moreno, who shared his determination to continue fighting: “We are poorly treated, poorly paid, suffering... this is the truth. And I am ready to fight while God lends me life.” The appropriate response to suffering and to God is to give oneself to the struggle for justice. Gustavo Martinez says that when he falters, he turns to God, asking for the “strength to continue in the struggle, in order to be more in God’s hands.” Knowing that their life is not their own, but part of God’s divine plan for justice, these CIW members reveal a readiness to struggle and sacrifice that is infused with a spirit of trust and thanksgiving. They know their sacrifice has meaning, whether or not it yields immediate strategic results. This is part of the ethos that permeates the CIW.

²⁷ Isasi-Díaz, *En la Lucha*, xix.

Conclusion

As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, my primary motivation for distilling and describing the key elements of the moral vision and ethos is that I believe it constitutes the underlying pull that attracted and enlivened the allies with whom I spoke. This chapter shows that the religious faith of the workers did not just affect workers on an individual level, but infused the CIW and the Taco Bell campaign. Their faith shaped and grounded the moral vision and the ethos of the organization, which allies found inspiring.

Certainly, the merit of the farmworker cause was fundamentally motivating for the religious and community allies. The evidence of sweatshop conditions and even slavery made the CIW's case compelling. As Presbyterian ally Dennis Wilson from Louisville put it, the legitimacy of their demands was a "no-brainer." He exclaimed, "They didn't ask for anything less than totally reasonable! And it was just pennies for Taco Bell!" Additionally, religious allies were motivated to respond because they saw fighting for justice and walking with the poor and the marginalized to be a gospel mandate. Lay minister Jacob Collins articulated the consensus of the group when he said, "That is what Christ was preaching....It is very easy to say as Christian you're called to free people from oppression."

But, in talking to the allies, it was apparent that this was a seasoned bunch of religiously-motivated social justice advocates. Only three allies cited the CIW as their entrée into political activism, including two students who got involved through their university. Ten of my fourteen religious allies had more than ten years of involvement in campaigns.²⁸ Thus, I was interested in *why* they chose to get involved in this cause,

²⁸ This was discerned through conversations and is a cautiously low estimate since I did not ask subjects their age or precise number of years involved in social justice. (Though, hindsight tells me this

among their many pursuits, and how the CIW compared to other causes. Their reflections and excitement about the CIW pointed beyond the cognitive merit of the cause or the moral imperative that gave impetus to their participation. They saw the CIW promoting and living out a moral vision and embodying an ethos that deeply resonated with them and their Christian values—human dignity and community, as well as sacrifice for the sake of both. In many cases, they were articulating and enacting it with greater authenticity than they found in their own churches, social movements, or campaigns.

That the mission of the CIW was about honoring human dignity and not just about fighting for higher wages and better benefits, appealed to allies. Dorothy Turner compared the CIW to other worker-rights campaigns, which she found wanting in terms of having a larger vision and spirit:

I think it is imperative for people of faith to be involved once they are lucky enough to get the message...because it is a movement of the value of the people of God. It is not just the pennies paid for each bucket [of tomatoes picked]. Other places, we don't look at things like that. Even if you look at...all the anti Wal-Mart stuff that is going on, it is in the context of people being abused or harassed at work.... But it is not in the context that this is wrong because it is offensive to God. I mean it *could* be. But it is not.

Also, in their emphasis on empowering workers through leadership development and cooperative management of the organization, she saw the CIW's charge as more than just winning campaigns, as determined as they were to do that. For Dorothy, "the coalition is not just about a series of actions, but steps toward wholeness of a community." It is holistic in its mission, attending not just to the body of the workers (i.e., higher wages), but also to their mind and soul through popular education, workshops, and community-

would have been a helpful question). I had simply asked with what other movements or campaigns religious allies had experience.

building. Rev. Noelle Damico joked that “if the church did leadership development the way the Coalition does leadership development, Jesus would be very pleased.”

We saw how Rev. Andrew Madison felt drawn and connected to the CIW because of the way in which they articulated, and even embodied their God-given dignity. He was impressed with the way the CIW appealed to the sense of family and saw the struggle as being about “my children and my children’s children.” That they had a long view, a multi-generational approach, seemed a contrast with the “more conventional” labor model. Ultimately, he also commended the CIW for its warmth and inclusiveness:

I don’t know all the elements involved in this, but I know the Coalition had a way of reaching out to various communities and bringing them in and making them all feel a part of this collective effort, and making everybody feel that they were significant and needed and wanted. So, whatever they did to do that was an excellent practice and they need to continue it.

This echoes the comments of CIW ally and cultural artist Luís Mendez at the beginning of the chapter claiming that the CIW had “a standard of treating all people with respect, equality and with love.” I believe this “practice” and this “standard” is the fruit of living out their moral vision founded on respect for human dignity of *all* and a sense of their identity as inherently rooted in community, broadly defined.

Last, as we saw above, many allies were both inspired and humbled by the sacrifice and commitment of the CIW. Ally Rev. William Moore lamented the rather anemic spirituality of many who call themselves Christians but are complacent in the face of so much social sin. He said he was drawn in by their spirituality, and that is what kept him hooked, hosting the CIW a second time despite some tensions in his congregation.

I’ll tell you who I was inspired by! By the workers....They inspired me! It [their spirituality] wasn’t a footnote for me! I guess that is why I am ranting and raving. And what about we Christians! Where is our spirituality?...Where is the sacrifice? Where is the fasting? And I just don’t mean fasting from the food, but

maybe our gasoline consumption, of our expensive toys. Where is some of the fasting in the middle class?

In essence, the CIW was a touchstone for him, and for the broader Christian community. He said he has used the CIW in many sermons since their Truth Tour visits. They were living the gospel reality by marching and fasting for justice, proclaiming the dignity and equality of all people under God, denouncing structures of exploitation, while announcing that another world was not only possible, but already under construction.

Participating in the CIW's Taco Bell campaign was a conversion (or confirmation) experience for many. An Episcopal priest in Naples declared, "I have learned not only from their faith but my own faith has been deepened...."²⁹ Human rights advocate Tracey Robinson asserted, "I've learned a lot personally about integrity and commitment and determination. These kinds of things have been hopefully lasting upon my soul." Laura Stern, a high school student in New York claimed,

My faith has just flourished from working with them... it's just so amazing to work with people who have this deep faith embedded in them that no matter what, they are going to win the struggle...It inspired me. And so it made me grow as a person and it made me have more faith in things....³⁰

This faith of the CIW fueled and shaped the moral vision and ethos of the CIW, which invigorated and energized the allies. Their faith, with its roots in Latino popular Catholicism, animated a profound conviction in human dignity, fostered a greater accountability to community, and yielded a readiness to sacrifice for family and future generations. The CIW consistently lived out these values, which moved, inspired, and enlivened the faith and imagination of those involved in the Taco Bell Boycott.

²⁹ Transcripts for documentary film, produced by Ron Schmidt, [2007].

³⁰ Ibid.

CHAPTER 6

LESSONS LEARNED

He or she who doesn't analyze remains a slave. —CIW saying

One of the primary motivations for choosing this thesis topic was the CIW's historic and unprecedented victory against Yum Brands, the world's largest restaurant company. They succeeded in winning a pay increase and having a say about working conditions for some of the most marginalized workers in the country. This victory warrants a close examination of its lessons, for there are millions more among the working poor who suffer exploitation. Miguel Torres, a community ally from the Midwest who relocated to Immokalee to volunteer with the CIW, explains: "Taco Bell was a battle, but there is still a war out there. We need to help other workers in other sectors."

Thus, this final chapter identifies those lessons for both faith-based allies and the broader audience interested in participating in campaigns for social and economic justice. First, I will identify the three most significant contributions of the congregations to the CIW campaign. Then I will lift up three challenges and offer a critique of activist involvement as it was experienced in the CIW campaign. Third, I will highlight those elements of the Taco Bell organizing which proved instrumental in galvanizing allies. Last, I will conclude with a final word on the contribution religious faith can make to a campaign for social reform.

Contributions of Congregations

Chapter 3 details the ways in which congregations and religious allies engaged in the CIW-led Taco Bell Boycott. I outlined seven ways in which they influenced the campaign and contributed to its success. Thus, here I will summarize the three contributions that seemed to have the greatest impact: allocating staff, providing a platform for encounter, and incorporating emotional and symbolic rituals.

Dedicated Staff. The national endorsements from the various church denominations and organizations were critical in terms of generating publicity, augmenting campaign credibility, and providing the CIW with access to resources. Among the most valuable assets, however, was the paid staff position (part-time) that the PC created to help implement the boycott within their denomination. This not only helped bolster the internal education of Presbyterian congregations, but also proved critical for developing more of a partnership with the CIW. Rev. Noelle Damico was more accessible to the CIW members in Immokalee. While the workers I interviewed were clear in acknowledging the participation of “all religions,”¹ several alluded to feeling especially supported by the PC, whom Diego Chávez described as “*muy metido*/very involved.” As Gustavo Martinez said, “We can always count on the Presbyterian church. The Presbyterian church and the Reverend Damico are always with us...it is beautiful.” The story in the previous chapter in which a worker thanked Rev. Noelle Damico and the church for honoring his dignity as a child of God reminds us that the significance of personal presence and accompaniment cannot be underestimated.

¹ Workers would often say “all religions” when referring to the variety of denominations that they saw participating in the boycott, although the majority to which they referred were Christian.

In addition to emotional value, the staff allocation also had strategic value. Ultimately, it allowed the PC fuller participation in the campaign and yielded greater leverage in the Taco Bell Boycott. Rev. Damico and Rev. Clifton Kirkpatrick, the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. (the denomination's official spokesperson) played an important role in facilitating dialogue and convening official negotiations between the CIW and Yum Brands executives.

Platform for Encounter. I argued earlier that the churches were the backbone to the Truth Tours, providing the lion's share of lodging, food, showers, financial and material donations for marches, hunger strikes, and rallies. But beyond the much needed logistical support, the churches provided the space, in both physical and moral terms, for engagement. First, by inviting farmworkers into worship services, adult education classes, and coffee-socials, they allowed an opportunity for listening and dialogue across the race, class, and "citizenship" barriers that often divide communities in this country. Such opportunities are rare. Dennis Wilson, a retired therapist who became acquainted with the CIW when his Presbyterian church hosted them in 2004, said that it was a gift to mingle and get to know the CIW members. He noted, "In my stratum, I don't generally have opportunities to spend time with piece-workers." Until he attended his church-sponsored immersion trip to Immokalee to help with the construction of the new CIW-community center, he had "never been that close to where a picker lived."

Second, the churches helped to frame the farmworker pay and working conditions as moral issues that affect and concern the whole Body of Christ, challenging the tendency to dismiss the CIW grievance as a labor or contract dispute. Jacob Collins tells of his pastor at a Presbyterian church in Southwest Florida. The pastor said from the

pulpit: “Sin is the refusal to recognize the dignity of another human being,” which he saw manifested not just in oppressive working conditions, but also in the refusal of growers and executives to meet with members of the CIW. The churches also helped link Christian stewardship to the need to be educated, responsible consumers.

Emotional & Symbolic Rituals. In Chapter 3, I showed how accompaniment by religious leaders, masses, prayer vigils, ceremonial blessings, and commissioning services provided important moral support and renewed hope for the workers. But it is important to reiterate the contribution of congregations in light of chapters four and five, which revealed the influence of religious faith on the activism of many workers and the ethos of the CIW. Now, we can grasp more fully the significance of the (largely) Christian rituals, symbols, and stories the religious community integrated. They fueled and renewed the moral vision of the CIW—confirming the dignity and worth of workers, validating their larger vision of community, and affirming sacrifice’s redemptive nature.

This is illustrated in an account ally Rev. Richard Walsh shared. He described a symbolic ceremony enacted during the 234-mile march to Orlando, Florida. In a modern-day interpretation of Jesus washing his disciples’ feet, members of his UCC church washed the feet of the walkers. This footwashing reversed the traditional role of servitude to which farm and immigrant workers are often confined, and reminded the workers of the sacred nature of their journey and sacrifice. Walsh notes this was a “profound act of humility and prayer” that was meaningful to all involved. At another parish along the route, a Catholic priest welcomed and blessed the members of the CIW with these words:

The greatest prophet was born in the little town of Bethlehem 2000 years ago, and you today come as prophets from the other little town....Yes! You are prophets because a prophet is a person who denounces injustices...and announces the good news of love, friendship, justice and peace. By the way that you denounce the

way many farmworkers are treated and announce your dignity as human beings and as Christian people, children of God.²

Such rituals reinforced the workers own sense of dignity and purpose. In this way, emotional and symbolic rituals reflect an important symbiosis between the CIW and religious allies. They played an important role in fueling the commitment and hope of the workers that typified the campaign. They also enlivened and renewed the faith of the religious allies who saw the CIW as living and revealing the gospel.

Last, I believe these rituals contributed to group cohesion. Sociologist Sharon Nepstad notes “rituals move people beyond their individual existence to a collective existence.”³ Social movement scholars in recent decades directed attention to the importance of constructing and maintaining a shared identity among the members of a movement for its ongoing viability. These collective identities “signify to themselves and the world who they are, what they stand for, and what kind of society they hope to create.”⁴ Certainly Christian rituals incorporated in the CIW campaigns powerfully expressed and affirmed their identities as children of God. Imbued with dignity, they occupied a privileged place in God’s plan for justice in the world, either for them, or for their children’s children. I also suspect that religious identity is a significant factor in fostering unity across the multi-ethnic constituency of the CIW, though more research would be necessary to explore that more fully.

² Kathy Kirley, E-mail to other members of Religious Leaders Concerned providing periodic updates from the 234-mile march from Fort Myers to Orlando, 25 February 2000, archived files of Interfaith Action, Immokalee.

³ Nepstad, *Convictions of the Soul*, 150.

⁴ Smith, “Bringing Religion Back,” 17.

Three Challenges and a Critique

No working relationship and alliance is without its challenges. Three stand out. First, the most consistent critique voiced by the CIW was the propensity for church folks to like to lead. They often had their own ideas about how the CIW ought to run its campaign and second-guessed its strategies.⁵ Interestingly, all in my sample of religious allies seemed excited to follow, as I mention below. But there were those who, perhaps because of their religious credentials and self-understanding as bridge-builders and mediators, sought to broker their own relationships with the growers or corporate executives.⁶

Second is the frustration with the charity model of assistance. This frustration seemed primarily to be a response to local congregations, especially in the neighboring coastal communities of Southwest Florida, for whom Immokalee is the proverbial “poster child” for food, clothing, and toy drives throughout the year. Yet, the CIW, as several members told me, does not want hand-outs or pity. Rather, they seek allies, people who will collaborate and take up the struggle for corporate responsibility as their own.

How to work in solidarity with the CIW was the third issue. This issue surfaced early, with the formation of the Religious Leaders Concerned after the hunger strike. I noted above the consternation that resulted from the failure to secure an immediate meeting between the growers and the CIW. This seemed to accentuate questions about

⁵ I don't believe this is a problem isolated to churches or to being *religious* allies per se. I suspect it is intertwined with power dynamics associated with race and class as well. It is true that the religious allies with whom the CIW worked (especially in Southwest Florida) were part of a predominately white and affluent demographic.

⁶ The most extreme example of this is in the case of a Catholic religious sister who originally acted as a consultant with the CIW in developing their shareholder strategy in the Taco Bell Boycott. But later, without communicating with the CIW, she contracted with McDonald's (the target of the CIW's current campaign) to conduct a study of conditions in the fields which was used by McDonald's to undermine the claims made by the CIW.

whether the group ought to be focused on wage issues, and fueled interest in branching out to address other issues of concern to farmworkers, such as pesticides and housing—issues in which some members in the group were already involved.

These three challenges teach an important lesson about joining in solidarity with poor and marginalized groups. Apart from the specifics in this case, it exemplifies the temptation in activist circles to set an agenda that, while commendable, may not actually involve the participation or support the self-determination of those most affected.

Activists can, wittingly or unwittingly, prioritize their own needs to feel effective or to see immediate results, and thus miss the deepest or most long-term needs of the people.

For the most part, however, the CIW applauded the role the churches played, and as one worker put it, felt they were “on the same page” and that a partnership had emerged. There was also a sense of mutuality. The CIW had contributed, too, to the churches by giving them a chance to “put their faith into action” as several workers attested. The harshest critique of the churches’ role came from within its ranks. One minister, while appreciative of the role his national denomination had played in the campaign and the activities of his own local congregation, believed that the reason the Taco Bell campaign had enjoyed such popular support in the pews was that it did not really make any hard demands of people. He asserts, “It didn’t cost us anything!” While it moved people perhaps to boycott a fast-food restaurant and write some letters, he questioned the real long-term change in thinking or practices of people. This challenge is worth considering. It probes what more churches might do.

However, my research suggests that the campaign was popular among allies precisely because it *did* point beyond quick action steps, though it asked those too. It

challenged people on a deeper level: creating more consumer consciousness and responsibility, inviting more serious race and class analysis, undermining many unexamined cultural assumptions, challenging and deepening faith, and in the words of one, helping them to believe that “change really is possible!” The reality is that the popularity of the campaign was also very much related to the quality of the organizing.

Factors of Success in the CIW Campaign

1. *Farmworker-Led*. Probably the single most inspiring aspect of the campaign, for farmworkers and allies alike, was that the Taco Bell Boycott was initiated and led by farmworkers themselves. Allies spoke of the transformative power in seeing the people most oppressed by systemic injustice fight, demand redress, and propose solutions. One IA staff person noted that she was tremendously moved the first time she came to Immokalee during her university immersion trip. She said the trips to the social service agencies were not so memorable. But going to her first CIW meeting and “seeing workers actually making change” stunned her. It was an awakening to have the “opportunity to meet with people who are doing something to change their destiny.”

For many, seeing immigrant field-workers at the helm of an organization and movement came as a surprise, even if a pleasant one. To see them give an economic and political analysis of the agricultural industry and comment on U.S. trade policy in their church, college classroom, or press conference challenged many latent (or conscious) class and/or race-based stereotypes and assumptions. CIW and IA staff can tell countless stories of how journalists and erstwhile churchgoers talk past the workers and direct questions and commentary to the translator (often Anglo). Neil Cullen, a student ally involved with the Student Farmworker Alliance (SFA), shared that getting involved with

the CIW three years ago helped increase his awareness and deepen his analysis of race and class dynamics, motivating him to change the way he engaged in campus organizing and to confront issues of white privilege.

That those working in the fields were the ones speaking for change, also added a potency and authenticity that many noted they do not see or feel in other political campaigns or movements. Presbyterian ally Julio Hernandez lamented that even in the ranks of the immigration reform movement, he did not often see recent immigrants at the forefront:

I think one of the failures I see...is that the leadership of the movement is embodied by people who are not subjects of the issue...When you see National Council of La Raza, etc. most of them are citizens, most are white or Latino, but they are not the voice of real undocumented workers in those organizations. But with the CIW, what I saw and experienced was that they were the ones affected. They controlled the campaign. They spoke for themselves.”

The CIW members were not “professional organizers” or career advocates, making a difference in the message and its reception. For many religiously motivated allies, it went beyond authenticity. Believing that God resides among the poor, having farmworkers lead a movement was a revelation. UCC ally Diane Hastings was both humbled and inspired in working with the CIW: “We gained an opportunity to be transformed by taking part in this struggle, to see God working through these farm workers and marginalized people who society deems to be some of the lowest folks on the totem pole.”

2. *Face-to-face relationship.* Personal relationships drove this campaign. Perhaps this insight might have been more intuitive just ten or fifteen years ago, before the explosion of Internet technology. The World Wide Web and e-mail have revolutionized organizing, and certainly proved instrumental in the Taco Bell Boycott. But the message of this

campaign is that while technology can facilitate, it is no substitute for old-fashioned-people-to-people organizing. This was both the logic and the magic of the four national Truth Tours and several regional tours which brought fifty to a hundred farmworkers to universities, churches, grammar schools, union halls, and community centers in dozens of cities across the U.S.. The CIW allies consistently mentioned face-to-face interaction with the workers as the motivating and sustaining factor critical to the success of the boycott. “When you see something so close,” said Julio Hernandez, “it becomes personal, then it makes a difference. And I think the success of the Taco Bell Boycott is that it became something close to people in churches, to kids, to pastors, to elders.” Rev. William Moore agreed. The difference for him and his congregation was personal encounter: “People got to know them on an intimate basis and got emotionally involved. So, it went from a theoretical thing to a compassionate thing.”

3. *Moral Vision.* My research illuminated that it was not simply the merit of the cause that motivated people, as compelling to people as the *picatero*'s plight and their demand for a “penny more per pound” was. As I noted in Chapter 5, the moral vision articulated and embodied by the CIW grabbed people and fueled their activism. People were drawn to who they were and what they stood for. They were inspired by the farmworkers who exhibited a profound sense of the dignity of each person, demonstrated accountability to their community, and showed a readiness to sacrifice so that justice could be realized, even if not in their lifetime. Their sense of purpose and dedication to the common good and to future generations, combined with their cooperative, egalitarian organizing model, demonstrated a vibrant communal ethos that defies the “expressive individualism” that Bellah and his colleagues found dominant in the American middle-class. This vision and

ethos attracted and sustained allies. Rev. Richard Walsh compared the CIW to many UCC congregations, lamenting that churches did not function as true communities. He suggested that they were mere “religious collectivities.” He explained, “We have this consumer mentality where people come to be entertained, and if they don’t like it, they leave. The sense of being servants or disciples, or whatever you want to say, isn’t strong.” This was the power in the CIW’s moral vision: it exposed the individualism that wittingly and unwittingly constrains the thinking and behavior of so many Americans.

4. *Congruence Between Vision & Actions.* This moral vision of the CIW was both strengthened and shown to be credible through the internal processes of the CIW. In colloquial terms, the CIW “walked its talk.” Religious ally Diane Hastings believes that the churches were willing to be involved not just because the cause was compelling, but because the struggle was “done so well.” She explains, “The aims were totally just and the processes and the means were also very just and very good.” This congruity between their vision and their organizing methods and structure was a key factor in moving people. Often, peace and justice movements fail to persuade people because their “actions for justice themselves often mimic the very violence, injustice, hardness, and egoism they are trying to challenge.”⁷ However, the CIW have policies and practices that honor the dignity of all, foster accountability to its base, promote cooperation, and temper egoism and the dominance of any one person. Respectively, this includes leadership development trainings and participatory meetings; democratic elections of staff and, by stipulation, staff wages commensurate with those in the fields, as well as mandatory work

⁷ Ronald Rolheiser, "A Spirituality of Justice and Peacemaking," in *The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 180.

in the fields for part of the year; and the CIW's non-hierarchical organizational structure. These serve to empower people and to cultivate a communal ethic of service and teamwork. In fact, other analysts of the CIW have noted that one achievement of the CIW is its demonstration that organizing does not depend on one charismatic leader,⁸ as in other farmworker movements such as the UFW or FLOC.⁹ According to Brian Payne, co-founder of the Student Farmworker Alliance, the CIW has produced more than one individual who "could probably be the next César Chávez if they wanted to."¹⁰ But they don't want to. A hierarchical organization built around a cult of personality does not honor their conviction that "we are all leaders."

5. *Religious Faith.* While Chapter 3 showed the significant role churches played in the Taco Bell campaign, substantiating why they were called the "secret weapon," I am suggesting that religious faith of the workers might be called the "secret ingredient" in the struggle. That is not to say that it was necessarily hidden, since we saw how it captured the attention of allies (religious and non-religious). Rather, it was the special element in the mixture that gave the movement its distinctive flavor. We saw that religious faith rooted in Latino popular Catholicism was an important factor in shaping the moral vision of the CIW. It helped them to believe in their own dignity as God's children and as the "chosen" poor; to perceive and feel the sanctity of their struggle for justice; to feel their accountability to an extended community and to future generations;

⁸ See Leary, "Take Down Taco Bell" and Marc Rodriguez, "The Farmworker Is Our Hope: Organizing and Victory in Immokalee" (Masters Thesis, University of Massachusetts, 2006).

⁹ FLOC (Farm Labor Organizing Committee) is a labor union affiliated with the AFL-CIO representing migrant farmworkers in Ohio and North Carolina that was founded in 1967 in Toledo, Ohio by Baldemar Velásquez who continues as its President.

¹⁰ Rodriguez, "The Farmworker is Our Hope," 11.

and to believe that their efforts and sacrifice had meaning and redemptive power. Importantly, I believe the workers' religious paradigm significantly contributed to their unwavering faith in their ultimate victory, which contradicted most pragmatic assessments of the situation. As one ally casually mentioned, "I thought to myself, 'A big corporation like Taco Bell, and a handful of farmworkers from some place in Florida that nobody has ever heard of...*Good luck!*'" But their confidence was enhanced by the belief that "God was there" in the trenches as CIW member Felipe Solorio said about the hunger strike, and enabling their efforts. It gave them the conviction that God's justice ultimately prevails. We recall the mantra of many CIW members, "It is not a question of *if*, but *when*."

Furthermore, this faith dimension of the workers contributed to the correspondence between their vision for social transformation and interpersonal dynamics. CIW staff-member Joaquín Zavala stated that he saw the justice-seeking mission as something that "God would be happy with." But he also brought a heightened consciousness to his daily tasks and interactions. He said "I think religion is about what you do everyday." He believes that "change starts within us, in our minds and in our hearts." It is this energy that greeted allies, as Rev. Andrew Madison mentioned in the previous chapter, "making everybody feel that they were significant and needed and wanted." Dennis Wilson concurred, saying that the CIW sought to "transform both heart and mind." This religious paradigm also seemed to yield an understanding or framing of their fight with Taco Bell and the growers in eschatological terms—their articulated goal was that of reconciliation and communion. This is manifest in the comments of CIW member Lucas Benitez in the local newspaper during their thirty-day hunger fast in 1998:

“We too have a dream. We hope that tomorrow the growers pick up their phone and answer the fasters’ call. So that through our dialogue we can begin down the road to a true community. Hand-in-hand, workers and growers all together in one community.”¹¹ While the CIW sought victory, they construed it as a means to bring about the right relationships that God intended.

Conclusion

Sociologist Robert Wuthnow argues that many of our reform efforts fail because they focus primarily on political changes. In the secular context of contemporary politics they are like broadly-based task forces and policy recommendations. He contends, however, that the question of true renewal in our society “is less about politics and fundamentally more about *culture*.”¹² His insight is key in illuminating the vitality and the effectiveness of the CIW and its Taco Bell campaign. The CIW is deliberately operating on the political level *and* the cultural level. It is seeking both economic/political “reform” with demands for higher wages, a code of conduct with worker participation, and legislative initiatives to stop human trafficking. However, as I have shown in this thesis, they are also confronting American culture by living out of a different ethos and moral vision. They challenge the embedded cultural assumptions or “cultural drag” that Wuthnow argues can constrain our vision and thus our best efforts at reform.

In this light, we can better understand the essential contribution of the religious faith of the workers. This faith, rooted in Latino popular Catholicism, proved to be an

¹¹ Gina Edwards and Jill Higgins, “Former President Carter Urges Wage Talks,” *Naples Daily News*, 19 January 1998.

¹² Robert Wuthnow, *American Mythos: Why Our Best Efforts to Be a Better Nation Fall Short* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 14.

important resource in the movement. It not only helped “tool” or “equip” the workers to participate in the struggle for justice, but also contributed to the communal vision and ethos of the CIW that exposed and countered the cultural drag that can undermine social movements. This drag includes the notion that individuals are predominantly self-made and the highest good is to seek personal fulfillment; that community is an extraneous, not an intrinsic part of our identity, and is not important for our growth and development; and that we should live for today and suffering should be avoided at all costs. All these latent notions or impulses conspire against striving for the common good and the real commitment and collaboration it necessitates.

Yet, the religious paradigm of many of the workers provided an alternative and an antidote to the assumptions rooted in individualism of North-American society. The CIW drew upon important religio-cultural values that signify deeper meaning in service to others, freedom found in community, and the redemption of self-sacrifice for justice. The religious faith of the workers is an important part of the matrix out of which its organizing methods and ethos emerged, which are powerful precisely because they are addressing the political *and* cultural foundations of power and exploitation. It is the consciousness and dual strategy—their internal organizing processes and their external political campaign—that has the hope of achieving the genuine renewal of which Wuthnow speaks. It has already made profound impact economically by changing the way Taco Bell does business, and it is making a profound difference in the way global justice organizing is being done.

APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Interviews with CIW Members

1. Pedro Montero, Mon. Jan. 9, 2006 - 6:00 p.m.; Mon. Jan 16, 2006 - 7:00 p.m.
2. Sergio Rodriguez, Thurs. Jan. 12, 2006 - 6:00 p.m.
3. Reyna Gaytan, Sat. Jan. 14, 2006 - 12:30 p.m.
4. Antonio Vásquez, Sat. Jan 14, 2006 - 4:00 p.m.
5. Gustavo Martinez, Mon. Jan. 16, 2006 - 9:00 a.m.
6. Diego Chávez, Thurs. Jan. 19, 2006 - 8:00 a.m.
7. Felipe Solorio, Fri. Jan. 20, 2006 - 6:00 p.m.
8. Lucas Benitez, Sat. Jan. 21, 2006 - 10:00 a.m.
9. Carlos Moreno, Sun. Jan 22, 2006 - 11:30 a.m.
10. Octavio Rojas, Jan. 22, 2006 - 3:30 p.m.
11. Rafael Huerta, Jan. 23, 2006 - 3:00 p.m.
12. Enrique Castillo, Mon. Jan. 23, 2006 - 6:00 p.m.
13. Joaquín Zavala, Wed. Feb 8, 2006 - 8:30 p.m.; Sept. 28, 2006 - 7:00 p.m.; Sat. Nov. 25 - 6:00 p.m. (by phone)

Interviews with Religious Allies

1. Jacob Collins, Presbyterian, Naples, FL, Thurs. Jan. 12, 2006 - 1:45 p.m.
2. Dorothy Turner, UCC, Central Florida, Tues. Jan 17, 2006 - 4:00 p.m.; Wed. Jan. 18, 2006 - 9:00 a.m.
3. Rev. Andrew Madison, Evangelical Trans-denominational, Sarasota, FL, Wed. Jan. 18, 2006 - 3:45 p.m.
4. Anna Lopez, Catholic, IA staff, Immokalee, FL, Sat. Jan. 21, 2006 - 9:00 p.m.
5. Angela Perez, Catholic, IA staff, Immokalee, FL, Sun. Jan. 22, 2006 - 9:00 a.m.
6. Susan Foley, Catholic, Fort Myers, FL, Tues. Jan 24, 2006 - 3:00 p.m.
7. Richard Walsh, UCC minister, Fort Myers, FL, Wed. Jan 25, 2006 - 3:00 p.m.
8. Rev. Noelle Damico, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) staff, Jan. 13, 2006 - 6:00 p.m. (in person); Feb. 3, 2006 - 1:00 p.m. (by phone)
9. Dennis Wilson, Presbyterian, Louisville, KY, Mar. 22, 2006, 2:30 p.m. (by phone)
10. Diane Hastings, UCC, Cleveland, OH, Apr. 19, 2006 - 9:00 a.m. (by phone)
11. Maureen Stewart, Catholic, Central Arizona, June 7, 2006 - 7:00 p.m. (by phone)
12. John Stewart, Catholic, Central Arizona, June 7, 2006 - 7:00 p.m. (by phone)
13. Damara Luce, non-denominational, IA staff, Immokalee, FL, Jan. 1, 2006 - 4:00 p.m.; Jun. 30, 2006 - 10:00 a.m.

14. Rev. William Moore, UCC, Southern California, Tues. Aug. 1, 2006 - 7:15 a.m.
(by phone)
15. Julio Hernandez, Presbyterian, Southern California, Fri. Aug. 4, 2006 - 5:00 p.m.

Interviews with Other Allies

1. Neil Cullen, student ally, South Florida, Tues. Jan. 10, 2006 - 8:30 p.m.
2. Miguel Torres, farmworker advocate, Michigan, Fri. Jan. 20, 2006 - 1:00 p.m.
3. Jimena García, local community ally, Immokalee, FL, Tues. Jan. 24, 2006 - 5:00 p.m.
4. Brian Casey, global justice activist, San Francisco, Mon. Feb. 27, 2006 - 9:00 p.m.
5. Tracey Robinson, human rights advocate, Washington, D.C., Mon. June 5, 2006 - 8:00 a.m. (by phone)
6. Luís Mendez, cultural artist, Southern California, Tues. July 11, 2006 - 6:00 p.m. (by phone)

APPENDIX B

CONSENT FORM

FAITH & ACTIVISM IN CIW CAMPAIGNS

Interview Consent Form

My name is Kristi Laughlin and I am a student at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California. I invite you to participate in the research that I am doing for my masters thesis. I am interested in examining the role that faith and religious organizations played in the Coalition of Immokalee Workers' (CIW) fight for better wages and working conditions that included a four-year long boycott of Taco Bell. I am conducting interviews with approximately thirty individuals, both CIW workers and religious allies. The interviews should last between one hour and one hour and a half and will be conducted in person at a location comfortable for the subjects (home, office, café) or by phone when necessary.

The main benefit of participating in this research is that you will help people better understand the relationship between faith and organizing. You will contribute to research that seeks to learn from successful campaigns, to examine ways in which the faith community has been effective in supporting struggles for economic justice, and how it might be more effective. I do not anticipate any risks or harm that participating will cause you. The interviews and resulting survey data are only intended for use in my thesis. All information I gather and the identity of the participants will remain confidential as I intend to use pseudonyms when reporting the data. Also, I will keep all records of these interviews (tapes and transcriptions) in a secure location. Please be aware that quotations from this interview and data from the survey will be used in my thesis. You should also be aware that you are free to refuse to answer any question or to terminate the interview at any time, and to withdraw from the research at any time.

If, after this interview, you have any questions or would like to add something for the record, please feel free to contact me, Kristi Laughlin at 510-847-2399.

I agree to participate in this research study and understand that, throughout the study, my identity will remain confidential.

Printed name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Thank you for participating in this research!

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