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**“Del pueblo, para el pueblo”:**

The Coalition of Immokalee Workers and the Fight for Fair Food

by

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**“Del pueblo, para el pueblo”:**

The Coalition of Immokalee Workers and the Fight for Fair Food

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## Dedication

To the members and allies of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers.

## Acknowledgments

I extend my deepest gratitude to members of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, the Student/Farmworker Alliance, Interfaith Action of Southwest Florida, Just Harvest USA, Fair Food Austin, and others committed to the struggle for a more just and humane agricultural industry and, in turn, a less broken world. I also thank Drs. Charlie Hale, Christen Smith and Eric Tang for serving on my thesis committee alongside their many responsibilities and for providing engaged and nuanced feedback throughout the process. Finally, I thank my family and friends providing both diversion and encouragement over the past two years.

**“Del pueblo, para el pueblo”:**

The Coalition of Immokalee Workers and the Fight for Fair Food

by

Randall Sean Sellers, M.A.

The University of Texas at Austin, 2009

Supervisor: Charles R. Hale

The Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) is a community-based worker organization comprised primarily of Mexican, Guatemalan and Haitian immigrants working in Florida's multibillion dollar agricultural industry. Since the early 1990s, the CIW's grassroots efforts have resulted in the near elimination of crewleader violence in Immokalee, Florida as well as the successful federal prosecution of six slavery cases. In 2001, the CIW launched an innovative campaign demanding that the retail food industry take measures to improve wages and working conditions for tomato pickers in its supply chain. With significant, multi-sector support from across the U.S., the Campaign for Fair Food won historic gains from Yum Brands and McDonald's – the world's largest

restaurant system and chain, respectively – as well as Burger King, Subway, and Whole Foods Market. The campaign presses ahead even amidst backlash from Florida growers.

This study, an outgrowth of my close involvement with the CIW since 2003; explores the past, present and future of the movement. I place the CIW – its formation, composition, strategies, and tactics – within a broader framework attentive to racial formations in Florida agriculture as well as complex processes of globalization. These processes produce new material conditions for workers through economic restructuring and migration (globalization-from-above) but also new opportunities for resistance and organization (globalization-from-below). Within this context, I argue that the CIW's remarkable success over the past fifteen years stems from its model of community mobilization – one that emphasizes popular education, leadership development, and collective action – adapted from rural social movements in Latin America and the Caribbean. Why and how did the translation of its organizing model take place? What previous models was it displacing? Why has it been so effective, both within Immokalee and far beyond Florida's fields? These questions lie at the heart of understanding a dynamic social movement with the potential to reshape the U.S. food industry from the bottom-up.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### A Night Not Soon Forgotten

Food is at the very heart of any society. The workers who plant, pick, and pack food throughout the U.S. – and around the world – have suffered generations of poverty and degradation. On this day, the very first World Social Justice Day, let us recognize the fundamental dignity of farm labor and the men and women who put the food on our tables.

-- Lucas Benitez, CIW, addressing the United Nations, February 2009<sup>1</sup>

Electricity pulsed through the darkness on a crisp evening in December 1996 as dozens of migrant farm laborers from Mexico, Guatemala, and Haiti streamed into the cramped office of a community-based worker organization in Immokalee, Florida.

Formed in 1992, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) burst onto the public stage – as if out of nowhere – in 1995 with a week-long general strike involving thousands of workers in the small town. The community-wide work stoppage succeeded in beating back a proposed wage cut in the tomato picking piece rate by one of the area's largest growers, but farmworkers still faced a staggering array of hardships: abysmal wages, no right to organize, supervisor violence, substandard housing, and even cases of forced labor.

Soiled and exhausted from a day in the fields yet animated by their growing numbers for the impending protest, CIW members chatted excitedly inside the cramped office. Just days earlier, a farm supervisor had brutally beaten a sixteen-year old Guatemalan worker for pausing to drink water while handpicking thousands of pounds of

tomatoes. The boss yelled between blows, “You came here to work, not to drink water!” Afterwards, the young man, his face swollen and shirt stained with blood, related the incident at the Coalition office. It was sadly ordinary in its cruelty, one more anecdote in the town's long history of degradation and violence against farmworkers.

However the tide in Immokalee was slowly if imperceptibly turning as currents of discontent coalesced into self-organization. The Coalition requested a meeting with the company's crewleader to discuss the beating. Clinging to the bravado of an increasingly bygone era, the crewleader, accompanied by a small posse, chided the farmworkers. After all, he implied, what recourse was available to such disposable and disenfranchised workers? Legal protections are almost nonexistent for farmworkers throughout the U.S., and the few laws that exist are notoriously under-enforced (Oxfam America 2004).

Award-winning journalist John Bowe underscores this last point:

As recently as 2007, the primary public interface of the Department of Labor's Wage and Hour Division in Fort Myers, Florida – serving an area with perhaps a hundred thousand Spanish-speaking migrant workers – consisted of an answering machine. The outgoing message enumerates in bland, English bureaucratese the few types of complaints the office does handle (and the many more that it doesn't). The recording further explains that the office has no full-time staff and that it's open only once a week, on Wednesdays, for half a day. There is no option to hear the recording in Spanish. (2007:55)

Even when involved, the state labor department rarely proves useful. In fact, an official investigation later concluded the young worker's rights were not violated in the “alleged” beating.<sup>2</sup> □

The Coalition's attempt at dialogue with the crew boss proved futile, so the workers began to formulate a different response, one that would rely not on lawyers or

bureaucrats but rather the farmworker community itself. Many CIW members had participated in popular movements in their countries of origin and began putting their considerable organizing skills to use in their new Florida community. They opted for a more direct solution to the recurring problem of violent bosses – a protest action to shake, if not fundamentally alter, the daily balance of power between crewleaders and farm laborers in Immokalee.

Having caught wind of the planned demonstration, thirty Collier County sheriffs in paramilitary-style fatigues and fifteen patrol cars formed a perimeter around the crewleader's home as the march stepped off from the CIW storefront. Converting the young worker's bloody shirt into a symbolic flag, marchers poured into Main Street with a chant that drew its inspiration from the immigrant worker struggles of the Industrial Workers of the World ninety years earlier, “*¡Golpear a uno es golpear a todos!*” (To beat one of us is to beat us all!)<sup>3</sup> In an isolated, rural labor reserve where plantation-scale growers profited handsomely by pitting a transient and ethnically diverse workforce against itself, this newly emergent solidarity represented a deep threat to the status quo.

As the growing crowd made its way through Immokalee's dusty streets to the crewleader's home, hundreds of people poured out of trailers and shacks along the march route, some to stand and stare, others to wave and shout encouragement, and still more to join the swelling mass. Upon reaching their destination, five hundred workers continued to chant loudly and wave the bloody shirt. The crewleader, joined by several sons and brothers, stood safely behind the police perimeter, yelling and gesturing impotently at the

workers. In the following weeks, he could not find workers for his fields as the majority shunned him in ongoing protest. The frequent beatings that characterized farm labor around Immokalee largely disappeared as the icy climate of fear that pervaded the worker community for so long melted away..

This study explores the past, present and future of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers. I place the CIW – its formation, composition, strategies, and tactics – within a broader framework attentive to the complex processes of globalization. These processes produce both new material conditions for workers through economic restructuring and migration (trends I refer to as *globalization-from-above* or *neoliberal globalization*), as well as new opportunities for resistance and organization (*globalization-from-below* or *counter-hegemonic globalization*).<sup>4</sup> Moreover, shifts in the global economy overlay and intensify historically racialized power imbalances in U.S. agriculture. In examining the CIW, I ask a series of questions: Why and how did the adaptation of its organizing model take place? What models was it displacing? Why has it been so successful both within Immokalee and far beyond the sweltering fields of southwest Florida? These questions lie at the heart of understanding the tenor and trajectory of the movement.

## Of Serfs and Kings

On May 23, 2008, more than a decade after the nighttime march, members of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers and representatives of the Burger King Corporation held a joint press conference at the U.S. Capitol to announce the signing of an agreement to



improve the wages and working conditions of Florida tomato pickers. The unlikely venue for the ceremony marked the final twist in a bizarre, year-long campaign to force the world's second largest burger company to adopt the principles of “fair food” for its tomato supply chain. Just nine days earlier, in response to mounting public outcry and media scrutiny, Burger King fired two high-level executives for their role in an anonymous blogger campaign to discredit the CIW through libelous emails and internet postings referring to the organization as corrupt “bloodsuckers” and the “lowest form of life.”<sup>5</sup>

On May 7, Eric Schlosser, bestselling author of *Fast Food Nation*, published an editorial in the *New York Times* excoriating the fast-food giant for secretly hiring a private security firm to infiltrate the Student/Farmworker Alliance (SFA), a key CIW ally network comprised of student activists across the U.S.<sup>6</sup> And a mere three weeks before news of the “spygate” scandal broke, Senators Bernie Sanders, Edward Kennedy, Richard Durbin, and Sherrod Brown convened the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions to investigate working conditions in Florida's fields. The hearings drew widespread attention to Burger King's efforts to roll back farmworkers' advances achieved through the Campaign for Fair Food.<sup>7</sup> By late May, a publicly pummeled Burger King Corporation was primed to settle the labor dispute.

At the May 23 press conference, Senator Sanders described his visit to Immokalee months earlier, an experience that clearly galvanized his commitment to the campaign. “I saw hopelessness among workers that I had never seen before in the U.S. I saw people

making pathetically low wages. I saw people living in terrible housing conditions paying extremely high rents, while others were unable to access health care.”<sup>8</sup> He continued, “Ironically, on the day that I was in Immokalee, another indictment on slavery charges was issued. In a nation where millions of workers are seeing their wages decline and where we are involved in a tragic race to the bottom, I saw that bottom.” Sanders closed by commending the CIW's leadership on the issue and strongly praising the new accord – the CIW's third such agreement with a major fast-food chain in as many years.

Under terms of the agreement, Burger King agreed to pay an additional net penny per pound to the Florida farmworkers who harvest its tomatoes and agreed to shoulder the additional administrative costs and payroll taxes to encourage grower participation (bringing the actual total to 1.5 cents per pound of tomatoes). Burger King also joined the CIW and other fast-food industry leaders in calling for an industry-wide penny per pound surcharge to increase the picking piece rate for all Florida tomato pickers. Finally, Burger King established an unambiguous “zero tolerance” policy for forced labor in its tomato supply chain and established a means for farmworker participation in monitoring growers' compliance with Burger King's supplier code of conduct.<sup>9</sup>

Lucas Benitez, a founding member of the CIW who left Guerrero, Mexico for Immokalee when he was seventeen years old, explained, “The events of the past months have been trying. But we are prepared to move forward, together now with Burger King, toward a future of full respect for the human rights of workers in the Florida tomato fields.”<sup>10</sup> He added, “Today we are one step closer to building a world where we, as

farmworkers, can enjoy a fair wage and humane working conditions in exchange for the hard and essential work we do everyday.” Burger King CEO John Chidsey issued the following statement:

We are pleased to now be working together with the CIW to further the common goal of improving Florida tomato farmworkers' wages, working conditions and lives. The CIW has been at the forefront of efforts to improve farm labor conditions, exposing abuses and driving socially responsible purchasing and work practices in the Florida tomato fields. We apologize for any negative statements about the CIW or its motives previously attributed to BKC or its employees and now realize that those statements were wrong. Today we turn a new page in our relationship and begin a new chapter of real progress for Florida farmworkers.<sup>11</sup>

While doubt may exist over the sincerity of Chidsey's words – after all, his company had fought the CIW with an assortment of dirty tricks to prevent the realization of just such an accord – there is no doubt that his company now publicly committed its formidable market power to improving the wages and working conditions of some of the least paid, least protected laborers in the U.S. Much remains to be done, but this was nonetheless a major victory for the Coalition of Immokalee Workers.

### Contextualizing Victory

Burger King's abrupt change of course is even more remarkable when one considers the truly humble roots of the drama's protagonists. From direct actions against local bosses to an innovative campaign targeting the purchasing practices of global food corporations, the CIW has remade once-obscure Immokalee into the epicenter of a broad-based social movement. Geographically, the unincorporated community lies on the edge of the Everglades and Big Cypress Swamp. It occupies the northwest corner of Collier

County yet exists entirely apart from the “expressed dreams of individual happiness amid tropical splendor” – including mansions and private jet runways – that define mainstream southwest Florida (Mormino 2005:77). Novelist Ted Conover writes:

Divorced from coastal development, retirement culture, the service economy, and the national limelight, the Florida interior is a world unto itself. . . . It seems like a place the civil rights movement forgot to visit, a slow-paced backwater where much, you have the feeling, hasn't changed in a very long time. . . . The change in scenery as we descended into the peninsula was dramatic. Expanses of bankless, shallow-watered lakes. Spanish moss on dead limbs. Whole woods of the same tree, the same mists. And, of course, agriculture – behind the alligator “farms,” vast fields of tomatoes, green peppers, melons, strawberries, sugarcane, and citrus – which were, of course, the sole reason we were here. (1987:133)

In southwest Florida, the disparity between the interior and the coast is perhaps sharper than anywhere else in the state. Naples, the seat of Collier County, boasts the nation's second highest per capita income, and more than 150 well-manicured golf courses dot the surrounding landscape.<sup>12</sup> By comparison, Immokalee's 2005 per capita income hovered around \$8,200 – less than twenty-five percent of the national average.<sup>13</sup> Immokalee's grinding poverty provides a jarring juxtaposition to the conspicuous consumption of Naples and its wealthy satellites.

Immokalee is the state's winter tomato production and packing hub, attracting a steady stream of workers seeking jobs from September to May.<sup>14</sup> □ Greg Asbed, another founding member of the CIW, makes clear, “Immokalee is a crossroads between the rural poverty of the global South and the promise of a modern job paying a minor fortune in

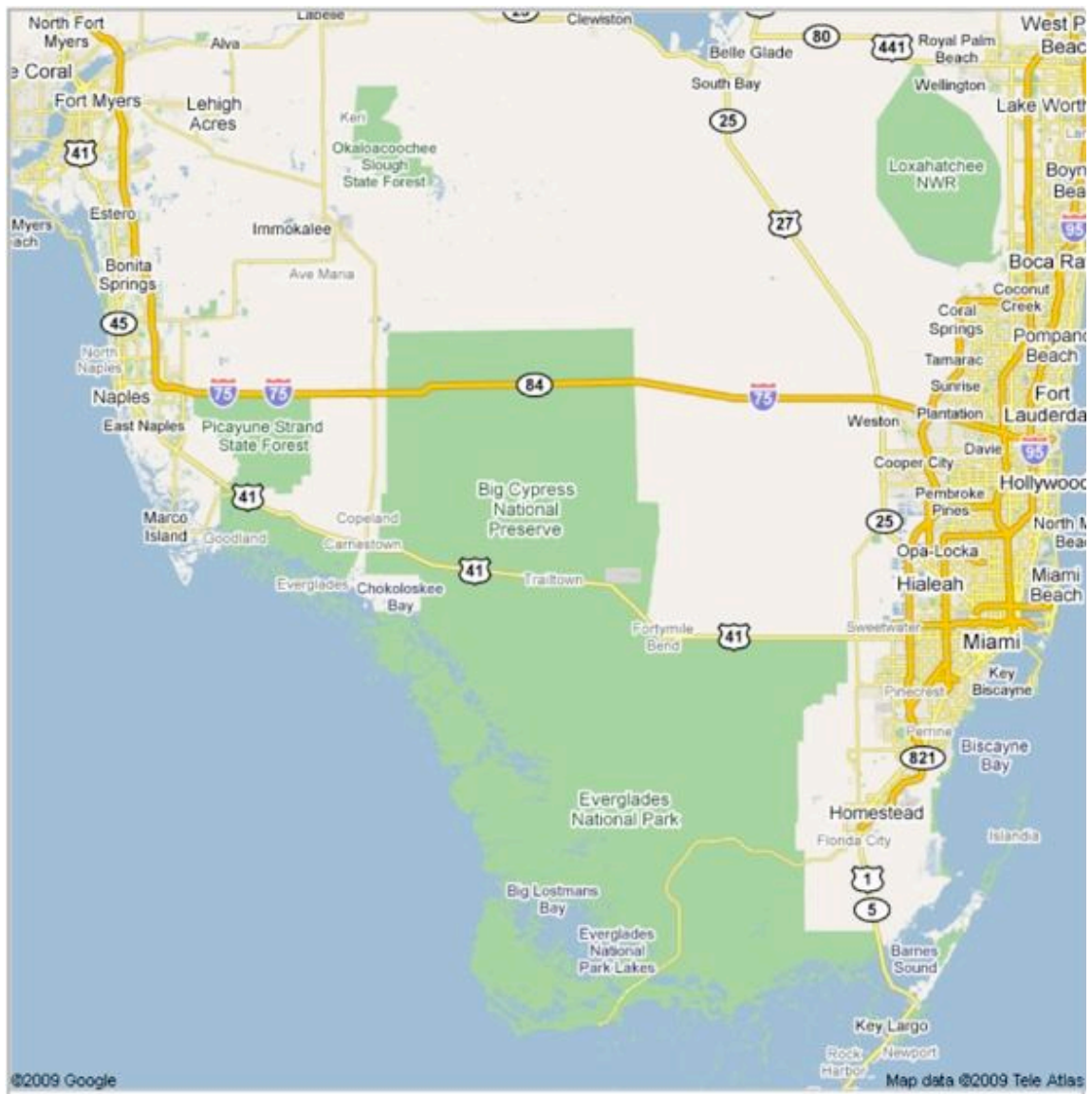


Figure 1. Map of South Florida.

American dollars” (2008:11). He adds, “If you stand on just about any street corner in Immokalee, you can easily hear four or five different languages – Spanish, Haitian Creole, Mixtec, Kanjobal, Quiche, Tzotzil, and more.” The town's population fluctuates dramatically during the winter fruit and vegetable harvest, doubling from around 15,000 permanent residents to nearly 30,000 during peak production. These workers are among the two million migrant farmworkers in the U.S. (Oxfam America 2004:7). Within the span of a single year, the farmworker community in Immokalee experiences near-complete turnover as new workers constantly arrive – including many recent immigrants – as others leave in search of better-paying jobs. Immokalee's churning farm labor market is structured to deny workers' long-term job security while community life further contributes to a pervasive sense of isolation. These dynamics work to the benefit of growers seeking a permanently unorganized and docile labor pool.

In this hostile setting, the key to the CIW's surprising traction lies in its model of community mobilization grounded in popular education, leadership development, and powerful protest actions – organizing methods translated from Latin American and Caribbean contexts and subsequently applied both within and outside Immokalee. Since 1993, these efforts have resulted in the near-elimination of crewleader violence in the area, the reclamation of hundreds of thousands of dollars in unpaid wages, and the successful federal prosecution of seven modern-day slavery cases leading to the liberation of well over one thousand captive workers. In 2001, the CIW took a bold and imaginative step forward by launching a corporate accountability campaign targeting the

vertically consolidated and increasingly powerful foodservice industry. The plainly named Campaign for Fair Food aims to connect the hidden exploitation in Florida's fields with the vast supply chains and omnipresent brand images of major fast-food corporations. If persuaded by the correct application of public pressure, the CIW reasoned, these large buyers could both require and subsidize basic reforms in their tomato suppliers' operations to improve harvesters' wages and working conditions. With support “from anarchists to archbishops,” the Campaign for Fair Food has won unprecedented gains from Yum Brands and McDonald's – the world's largest restaurant system and chain, respectively – as well as Burger King, Whole Foods Market, and Subway. In an era when most workers are losing ground, the CIW is radically reshaping the base of the trillion dollar U.S. food industry through an ever-expanding alliance of farmworkers, consumers, and corporations.

## Chapter Outlines

In working through my research questions, I divide this study into five sections. In addition to providing a brief overview of the Coalition, the introduction outlines my research methods and history of involvement with the CIW – a history that predates and profoundly shapes my attempt to create an academic representation of the movement. The second chapter surveys contemporary farmworker life in Immokalee and situates it within a historical genealogy of African slavery and other forms of racialized labor exploitation in the South. I then map globalization processes that drove significant

numbers of people to migrate from rural Mexico, Guatemala and Haiti to southwest Florida beginning in the 1970s and accelerating thereafter. These migrations contributed to a sweeping demographic transformation within the East Coast migrant workforce that affects the composition of the CIW's membership base and its methods for social change.

Chapter three offers an in-depth analysis of the Coalition's organizing model and its roots in Latin American and Caribbean popular movements. In doing so, I recount the group's early campaigning through 2000 and pay additional attention to its ongoing local organizing. Chapter four tackles the Campaign for Fair Food – its development, evolution, and broader political context. I situate the campaign within an upsurge of post-Cold War social movement activity and “global justice” organizing networks starting with the indigenous Zapatista rebellion in Chiapas, Mexico in 1994 and reverberating in street protests in Seattle and other cities and at international gatherings such as the World Social Forum. Just as the CIW translated Latin American peasant organizing methods to the hinterlands of southwest Florida, another effective translation took place that facilitated multi-sector organizing throughout the U.S. Specifically, I draw on the rich history of the Student/Farmworker Alliance to explore this form of coalitional politics. The final chapter concludes with an assessment of key theoretical and practical implications of the Coalition's work over the past fifteen years.

### Finding a Political Home

This thesis stems from my involvement with the CIW over the past six years. As



an undergraduate at the University of Texas at Austin (UT), I studied the rhetoric of U.S. social justice movements and tested my emerging perspectives on social change through campus organizing. This path brought me into initial contact with the CIW in 2003, two years after the launch of its nationwide Taco Bell boycott. A small but diverse coalition of student groups including the Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán (MEChA), Acción Zapatista, and a renegade chapter of the Campus Greens hosted a farmworker delegation from Immokalee in October 2003 for a workshop on the Taco Bell boycott and the proposed Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), an expansion of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) to every country in the Americas except Cuba. Like dozens of schools around the country, UT had a Taco Bell restaurant on campus, and students were organizing to cut its contract as a means of pressuring the chain's corporate leadership to meet the CIW's demands. In addition to providing a riveting organizational history and firsthand testimonies of conditions in the fields, the Coalition's presentation seamlessly linked their locally rooted struggle to broader global processes. They closed with an appeal to the seventy workshop participants to not only continue the Taco Bell boycott but to join the CIW at an upcoming protest against the FTAA ministerial meeting in Miami, noting the essential continuity between the two struggles.

This call to action resonated strongly with myself and many others, influenced as we were by the creative critiques of capitalism popularized by the EZLN and ensuing global justice protest movement.<sup>15</sup> One month later, a dozen of us traveled 1,500 miles to

participate in the three-day, 34-mile Root Cause People's March alongside one hundred CIW members as local, state, and federal authorities transformed Miami into a militarized state of exception under the guise of “homeland security.”<sup>16</sup> Against this bleak backdrop, the colorful Root Cause march put forth a positive vision of social change explicitly led by working-class communities of color – the people most severely impacted by the jagged edges of globalization-from-above. Flanked by openly hostile riot police in the streets and government helicopters circling above, the final day of the peaceful march was surreal, disturbing, and personally transformative. Five months later, I joined the logistics team on the CIW's march from East Los Angeles to Taco Bell's headquarters in Irvine, California. The three-day march was again led by farmworkers who had travelled cross-country on two large buses – stopping to speak at colleges, churches, union halls, and community centers along the route – and culminated in a powerful, music-infused protest at the base of Taco Bell's glass and steel skyscraper.

I was profoundly impacted by these experiences and compelled to deepen my involvement. The visible leadership of workers themselves impressed me greatly and immediately set the CIW apart from other labor and community organizations I knew. Similarly, the CIW's strong insistence that allies work with – not for – farmworkers further influenced my evolving understandings of power, privilege, and social change. I was also affected by my personal exchanges with CIW members who openly talked of their experiences in the U.S. as I struggled to understand and respond with my fledgling Spanish. When I graduated and moved to Immokalee one year later, the CIW was still

leading the protracted Taco Bell boycott. As co-coordinator of the Student/Farmworker Alliance, my role was to organize support for the campaign among students and youth – the fast-food industry's key consumer target market. During this time, I integrated myself as much as possible into the worker community through my living arrangements, immersion in Spanish, and summer employment in the watermelon fields of Florida, Georgia, and Missouri. The Taco Bell boycott victory in 2005 – and each subsequent campaign victory – not only spurred long-overdue, structural reforms in the Florida agriculture industry but cemented my commitment to principles of social justice, collective action, and community-led change. There was no turning back.

### Working in the Field(s)

I made the difficult decision to leave Immokalee in 2007. Upon my return to Austin in the fall, I immediately sought spaces to reflect on my experiences while staying connected to the movement. I entered graduate school at UT, on the one hand, skeptical of traditional notions of objectivity in the social sciences which can subjugate researchers' ethical commitments to insular academic norms and agendas. On the other hand, I took very seriously Robin D. G. Kelley's claim that, “social movements generate new knowledge . . . [and that] the most radical ideas often grow out of concrete intellectual engagement with the problems of aggrieved populations confronting systems of oppression” (2002:8). While Immokalee remains my political home, I found a supportive and generative academic community with a group of practitioners of so-called

“activist anthropology.” My understandings of ethnography, research methods and knowledge production have been strongly shaped by students, professors, courses, and projects tied to this emerging field.

Although no unified or fixed approach exists for these methods, a researcher's alignment in some capacity with a community in struggle is perhaps the single common denominator. Charles Hale notes other important aspects such as: “horizontal dialogue and broad-based participation in each phase of the research; critical scrutiny of the analytical frame; [and] thorough critical self-reflection” (2008:8). By forging alignments with communities in struggle these methods incorporate and yet move beyond cultural critique by centering carefully considered *political action*. They also seek to challenge hierarchies between “researchers” and their “subjects” and, in doing so, move towards collaborative models of knowledge-production. This approach should “foster a commitment to listen closely. . . [and] to assign special importance to their agency and standpoint. This requires a certain practice of qualitative research methods, not as a sole defining feature, but as a necessary element to ensure that these people’s voices are heard” (Hale 2008:4). At its best, activist research can provide greater methodological rigor, richer theoretical insights, and more socially relevant research outcomes.

In part, activist research methods arose as a response to feminist, postcolonial, and poststructuralist critiques which contend that all knowledge is produced in a political context. Following this line of thought, activist researchers must scrutinize the subject-formation processes between themselves and the communities they align themselves.

Nobody stands outside the discursive flow of power relations. This intervention, though, risks political paralysis to the degree that it promotes – or, rather, is deployed to justify – a form of epistemological relativism that hinders making truth claims, however modest, in the service of social justice. At this juncture, feminist theorist Donna Haraway's notion of *situated knowledges* – “an epistemology and politics of engaged, accountable positionings” – is useful (1988:590). This concept provides an alternative to critique-driven relativism as well as the positivist “view from above, from nowhere” (589). She clarifies:

So, I think my problem, and “our” problem, is how to have *simultaneously* an account of radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims and knowing subjects, a critical practice for recognizing our own “semiotic technologies” for making meanings, *and* a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a “real” world, one that can be partially shared and that is friendly to earthwide projects of finite freedom, adequate material abundance, modest meaning in suffering, and limited happiness. (579)

These partial, critical knowledges sustain, according to Haraway, “the possibility of webs of connections called solidarity in politics and shared conversations in epistemology” (1988:584).

If the notion of *situated knowledges* establishes a basic theoretical topography, activist research methods provides a navigational map. At the forefront of these methods is the question: “Research for whom and towards what purpose?” Here I am particularly interested in Melissa Forbis' astute intervention in the “activist research” conversation:

I am troubled that this formulation [of activist research] has such an emphasis on putting oneself at the service of the group or organization one is working with. Rather than participating, or walking alongside, the researcher brings the useful knowledge back to the group. I believe this can run the risk of reinscribing the

anthropologist as an “expert,” rather than contributing to processes of decolonization. This position also rests on the idea that we ourselves are not actors in these struggles writ large and our actions in these separate spheres are not somehow connected through our own practice. We are allies, but we are also in struggle and the process must be dialogic. (2008:19)

Forbis' modification emphasizes research as a form of politics and the importance of militant engagement in the academic realm. “Militant research,” she writes, “does not always involve clearly marked strategic goals and outcomes, such as providing expert testimony or documentation, although it might. *Ethnography can also be a tool for collective analysis and reflection*” (2008:30-31, emphasis added).

Guided by a political sensibility towards social justice yet aware of the inherent risks of representation, I employ this model to portray the subjectivities of some of the movement's participants, namely migrant farmworkers and their young allies. In a departure from conventional activist research methods which situate the analyst as allied with but ultimately outside the movement under investigation, I drew on my pre-existing experiences to formulate this study's research questions. My fieldwork, then, dates back to 2003 and draws heavily from the time I spent living in Immokalee between 2004 and 2007. For additional research, I returned to Florida during the summer of 2008 as a member of the CIW's watermelon harvesting cooperative, of which I had been a member since the summer of 2005. It is safe to assume that my identity as both a *sandillero* (watermelon worker) and long-time ally obscured my tertiary identity as a researcher during the summer. During the course of my graduate studies, I also maintained active involvement in on-the-ground ally organizing through Fair Food Austin, a local collective

within the SFA network that played a key role in bringing about the CIW's agreement with Whole Foods Market. As a point of clarification, all uncited quotations throughout the study were gathered during fieldwork. I identify speakers by first name only except for those who are regularly identified by both first and last name on the CIW website or in press coverage.

In terms of research, I supplemented my fieldwork with a number of sources, including materials from the Coalition's archives in Immokalee (as well as its extensive website) and the Walter P. Reuther labor archives at Wayne State University in Detroit. I also draw on several studies examining different aspects of the CIW and the Campaign for Fair Food (Asbed 2008; Gonzalez 2005; Laughlin 2007; Payne 2000; Rodrigues 2006; Walsh 2005)<sup>17</sup>. I aim to build on this small but generally sound body of literature, offering my own interpretations where they diverge from others, investigating some key under-studied aspects of the movement, and lastly, bringing the Coalition's story up to date. In some areas, I provide deeper and more recent empirical evidence to support claims made in earlier studies. In other areas, such as the growth of the CIW's expansive ally network – particularly the student and youth component – I offer distinct takes on the movement's success. To be clear, the underlying concepts in this study are very much a product of collective analyses forged over years of struggle. Accordingly, as part of my research and representational methodology, a draft of this study was shared with members of the CIW and SFA, and suggested revisions were incorporated into the final product. At a base level, it is my hope that this study indeed provides a tool for collective

analysis and reflection as the fair food movement continues to create the world anew,  
from Florida's fields outward.



## CHAPTER TWO

### A Genealogy of Florida Farm Labor Relations

Slavery is not the issue. The issue is the cancer that has been eating at Florida's agricultural industry since its inception, the fact that it is founded on the unending and degrading exploitation of the men and women who harvest our crops.

Modern-day slavery is just the most glaring and violent symptom of that cancer. You cannot end slavery without first treating the cancer.

-- Gerardo Reyes, CIW, addressing a press conference on the steps of the Florida capitol, March 2009<sup>18</sup>

It looked a lot like apartheid.

-- Raj Patel, author, after visiting Immokalee, March 2009<sup>19</sup>

#### Ground Zero for Modern Slavery

On November 20, 2007 – roughly a week before the CIW and 1,500 allies marched nine miles from downtown Miami to Burger King's headquarters – three men described to Collier County sheriffs their escape from an Immokalee-based tomato harvesting slavery ring. The workers had punched and kicked their way out of a box truck on South Seventh Street just two days earlier. A second group of escapees soon made their way to the CIW office five blocks away. They had learned of the Coalition by way of *Radio Conciencia* (Radio Consciousness), the organization's low-power FM station that broadcasts music, news, and informational programming in Spanish, Haitian Creole, and several Mayan languages. Some of the fifteen workers had been held captive for more than two and a half years by crewleader Cesar Navarrete.<sup>20</sup>

Grim details of the case soon surfaced. Workers had been chained to poles inside the truck, forced to urinate and defecate in its corners, and charged five dollars apiece each time they wished to bathe with a garden hose. Held against their will, they received vicious beatings when unable or unwilling to work or when they attempted to flee. In the words of U.S. Attorney Doug Molloy, it was one of southwest Florida's "biggest, ugliest slavery cases ever."<sup>21</sup> It soon became clear that the enslaved crews worked on some of the largest farms in the U.S.: Six L's Packing Company in Immokalee and Pacific Tomato Growers in nearby Palmetto.

Meanwhile on November 20, Andre Raghu, global managing director with the supply chain monitoring group Intertek, gave Florida agriculture a clean bill of health in regards to labor relations. Unaware of the unfolding developments a few blocks away, Raghu went so far as to assure a reporter from the *Miami Herald* that there was no slave labor in Florida's tomato fields.<sup>22</sup> Raghu was part of a press junket to Immokalee organized by Burger King – who was squarely in the Coalition's crosshairs – and the Florida Tomato Growers Exchange (FTGE), one of several powerful agribusiness lobbies in Florida. The carefully orchestrated visit culminated with Burger King making a much ballyhooed \$25,000 charitable donation to the Redlands Christian Migrant Association, a migrant child-care facility. The aim was to undermine public support for the Campaign for Fair Food by demonstrating the goodwill of the growers and the hyperbolic nature of the CIW's claims of abuse in Florida's fields. Except, as the escapees' incredible story demonstrated, the claims were not hyperbole at all.

At the Navarette's sentencing a year later, Molloy described the systemic nature of forced labor in Florida agriculture, noting, “We have a number of similar – and ongoing – investigations.”<sup>23</sup> The case became the seventh farm labor operation to be prosecuted for servitude in Florida in the past decade; the CIW has assisted in the investigation and prosecution of five of these cases.<sup>24</sup> The cases – involving well over one thousand workers and fifteen farm employers – spurred one Justice Department official to describe Florida as “ground zero for modern slavery.” Covered in major newspaper and magazine exposés and a widely acclaimed book, these cases have catalyzed greater public attention around the issue of modern-day slavery and human trafficking.<sup>25</sup>

What's more, the CIW's anti-slavery work has helped spur federal policy changes. The five-year investigation of a case in which 400 men and women were forced to pick vegetables and citrus in Florida and South Carolina led to the convictions of crewleaders Miguel Flores and Sebastian Gomez on slavery charges in 1997. The case helped lead to the creation of a federal Worker Exploitation Taskforce and eventual passage of the landmark Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000, the first anti-slavery legislation since 1865. These efforts earned the CIW the 2007 Anti-Slavery Award presented by Anti-Slavery International – spearhead of the British abolitionist movement two centuries ago – as well as the 2003 Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Award. Benitez, along with Coalition members Romeo Ramirez (who, after the FBI balked, went undercover to investigate a 700-person slavery ring in central Florida) and Julia Gabriel (an escapee from the Flores operation), accepted the RFK honors on behalf of the CIW. It was the

first time in its twenty year history the prestigious award had gone to a U.S.-based non-governmental organization (NGO).<sup>26</sup>

While the Navarettes, Flores and others targeted immigrant workers, similar cases have involved U.S. citizens. In 2001, Michael Lee pled guilty to a slavery conspiracy charge for using debt, crack cocaine, and violence to enslave African American citrus harvesters he recruited from Florida homeless shelters; Lee was sentenced to four years in federal prison. In 2007, Ronald Evans was sentenced to thirty years in federal prison on drug conspiracy, witness tampering, and financial re-structuring charges. Evans also recruited African Americans from homeless shelters across the Southeast. At a barbed wire-enclosed camp outside Palatka, Florida, he held workers “perpetually indebted” – through debits for housing, food, alcohol, and drugs – in “a form of servitude morally and legally reprehensible,” according to the Department of Justice.<sup>27</sup> Evans' crew harvested potatoes for Frank Johns, the 2004 Chairman of the Florida Fruit and Vegetable Association (FFVA).<sup>28</sup> Criticizing “overblown” media coverage of the case, Johns stated, “I’d like to think our operation is a little above average, and I think Ron Evans is an above-average crew leader.”<sup>29</sup> These diverse cases give credence to the Coalition's claim that Florida agriculture is an “equal-opportunity exploiter” preying not just on immigrants but vulnerable workers write large.

Out of necessity, anti-slavery work figures prominently in both the Coalition's daily community education and its corporate accountability campaign. The multi-faceted approach stems from an analysis of unequal power relations in the fields. CIW members

frequently describe forced labor with the metaphor of a plant: slavery is the stalk that is rooted in the fertile soil of everyday “sweatshops in the fields.” In this view, slavery does not occur in a vacuum but rather takes place within the degraded labor environments of Florida agriculture. As Senator Bernie Sanders remarked after his January 2008 visit to Immokalee, “The norm is a disaster, and the extreme is slavery.”<sup>30</sup>

To combat forced labor, the CIW engages in case-by-case investigations and trains law enforcement and social service agencies on how to recognize and assist victims of slavery. Towards this end, the CIW helped found the Freedom Network USA in 2001. The CIW has also helped draft anti-trafficking curriculum for Florida law enforcement agencies as well as traveled to Thailand at the invitation of the International Labor Organization and Global Alliance Against Trafficking of Women to share its approach with NGOs from across the world. At the same time, the Coalition argues that the key to permanently eliminating modern-day slavery lies in changing the market conditions that encourage such abuses.<sup>31</sup> Laura Germino, coordinator of the anti-slavery campaign, summarizes:

We know and understand enforcement, but we also – exactly because of our experience – know that enforcement is not enough, because it’s cleaning up an abuse after it’s already happened. It’s enforcing after people – victims – have been beaten, shot, raped, and threatened with death. We have got to get beyond enforcement to the prevention – the elimination – of forced labor in the Florida agricultural industry.<sup>32</sup>

For this reason, slavery has become visible as a central theme throughout the Campaign for Fair Food, both rhetorically in framing the issues at stake to the public and quite concretely in negotiations with large buyers of Florida tomatoes.

If, as Coalition members contend, the normative labor relations in Florida's fields enable extreme abuses such as slavery, then we might ask how these conditions came about in the first place. This chapter argues that hegemonic understandings of race and labor in the South played an essential role in the sociospatial emergence and organization of the migrant farm labor market. At both an ideological and material level, the Atlantic Coast migrant stream flows from earlier forms of racialized labor such as African chattel slavery, the convict lease system, and sharecropping. Historian Jerrell Shoffner argues further that, “The practices already established in the northern Florida cotton fields and pine forests moved southward with the lumber and turpentine companies, into the citrus groves, and finally into the sugarcane and winter vegetable fields of the Everglades” (1981:414). Forced labor has never been truly vanquished from the fields of Florida. Rather today's cases reflect the globalization-driven transformations, both demographic and structural, that have considerably reshaped Florida agriculture over the last thirty years. These contemporary labor conditions, which I survey next, provide a useful entry point into the larger genealogical discussion and underscore the urgency of the Coalition's farm labor reform efforts.

### Sweatshops in the Fields

Each morning around five o'clock, hundreds of laborers gather in the parking lot of the Pantry Shelf and at pick-up sites throughout Immokalee to search for work in nearby tomato, citrus, cucumber, melon, and pepper fields. As Lucas Benitez recently

testified at the United Nations, “Immokalee is a labor reserve, similar in its demographics and socioeconomic character – 90% young, single immigrant males doing stoop labor for poverty-level wages in the agricultural industry – to the labor reserves of Brazil and South Africa.”<sup>33</sup> In the U.S. edition of the globalized plantation, the workforce is mostly young, Mexican-born men, including high numbers of recently arrived immigrants. The U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) estimates that at least half of the nation's agricultural workforce lacks proper work authorization and four out of five are hired on temporary basis (Oxfam America 2004:19).

In Immokalee and elsewhere, this precarity increases harvesters' reliance on crewleaders, the link between a constantly shifting mass of workers and the handful of grower-shippers that dominate Florida's winter vegetable production. Crewleaders recruit, transport and supervise workers in the fields and also determine and distribute pay; some crews are large with hundreds of workers, while others are much smaller. Crewleaders may wield immense control over their workers, as evidenced in the rash of modern-day slavery cases. Unequal power relations, however, run much deeper than conflicts between farmworkers and crewleaders. In fact, these asymmetries lie at the very core of the industry. Anthropologist Daniel Rothenberg makes the point:

Seasonal farmworkers are profoundly, if paradoxically, modern. While the labor provided by farmworkers is traditional in nature – hoeing; weeding; pruning; and, above all, hand harvesting – the pressing need for large numbers of temporary laborers is a function of the industrialization of agricultural production. . . . The industrialization and technological sophistication of modern agriculture has produced an increased need for temporary, itinerant laborers to provide the most traditional forms of hand labor. . . . As agricultural production becomes increasingly technological, with laser-leveled fields, genetically engineered seeds,

and computer-controlled irrigation, and as farms begin to look like other large corporations, the difference between seasonal laborers and their employers becomes ever more striking. (2000:12-23)

These disparities shape nearly every aspect of farmworkers' livelihoods from job security, wages, and working conditions to health, occupational safety, and housing.

As fruit and vegetable pickers congregate in Immokalee's cold predawn, they seek work (and often receive humiliation) from crewleaders whose buses line the Pantry Shelf's parking lot. For those unable to find a job – because of age, gender or simply the frequent lack of work inherent in an industry affected by so many variables – their workday ends before it starts and without compensation for availability. Precarious employment magnifies the poverty already tied to low wages, CIW members point out. “I want to put this plainly,” Benitez explained to the Senate labor subcommittee in 2008. “Farm work is not like any other job. Farm work is a full-time job with irregular hours. Some weeks you'll work overtime. Some weeks you'll work part-time. And some weeks you won't work at all.” He adds, “But you have to be available every day, or you won't have a job. And in the vast majority of picking jobs, you get paid for what you pick, not for the hours you work. That's why farmworkers are poor.”<sup>34</sup>

On any given day during Immokalee's harvests, many workers do emerge from the parking lot free-for-all with a job. They then embark on an unpaid ride to the fields, which lasts anywhere from thirty minutes to two hours. Once in the fields, workers wait without pay for morning dew to evaporate off the plants before they begin harvesting. After the crewleader signals, they rapidly begin filling plastic buckets with green,



pesticide-covered tomatoes as afternoon temperatures may climb well into the nineties. Workers haul the buckets, each weighing thirty-two pounds when full, to the edge of the field and toss them up to another worker who dumps the fruit into large bins stacked on flatbed trucks. The harvester then returns to his or her row with a chit and an empty bucket only to start again. This repetitive, grueling task earns roughly forty-five cents for every bucket of tomatoes picked – virtually the same piece rate as in 1978. At this rate, workers must now pick over twice the number of buckets per hour as they did thirty years ago in order to earn minimum wage. Or put differently, workers must pick nearly two-and-a-half tons of tomatoes in order to earn minimum wage for a typical ten-hour day.<sup>35</sup>

Farmworkers' annual incomes are abysmally low. Between 2001-2002, the DOL estimates that an individual crop worker's income averaged between \$10,000 and \$12,499 while total family income hovered between \$15,000 and \$17,499 (2005:xi). However the DOL figures actually overestimate crop worker income since they include crewleader and other supervisory earnings in their calculation. All told, “low wages, sub-poverty annual earnings, [and] significant periods of un- and underemployment” prompted the DOL to label farmworkers, “a labor force in significant economic distress” (2000:18). The agency concludes, “While the labor-intensive [farm] commodities experience dramatic output and sales growth, hired and contract labor is not sharing in the rewards of increased growth through increased wages. Wages have been stagnant and, in real terms, have even seen significant decline” (2000:5). Farmworkers also frequently suffer wage-theft by exploitative crewleaders. One young Guatemalan man told me of a boss who

owed him and two cousins nearly \$5,000 dollars for work performed on an organic farm in Oklahoma. Others spoke of unpaid days harvesting tomatoes and peppers in Florida, and many members recall coming to the CIW office for the first time in order to reclaim stolen wages. All together, farm wages and working conditions in the Southeast are considered the worst in the U.S. by workers and analysts alike (Bauer 2008).

Legal exceptionalism shapes the overall context of farmworker poverty since laws unique to the agricultural system set farmworkers apart from other workers. For instance, farmworkers were excluded from the collective bargaining rights enshrined in the 1935 National Labor Relations Act and the right to overtime pay guaranteed by the 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act (López 2007:99-100). Scholar-activist Ruth Wilson Gilmore looks at how, “The racial, industrial, gender, and regional divisions reflected in eligibility for and the scope of New Deal agencies and programs institutionalized Jim Crow without speaking his name.” “In other words,” she discerns, “the anomaly that emerged in the 1930s was not only the welfare-warfare state, but also the extension of regional norms to national relationships” (2007:79). These exclusions from progressive labor protections – economically motivated and racially justified – legally codified the second-class status of farmworkers that persists seventy years later.<sup>36</sup>

In addition to wages and working conditions in the fields, this second-class status is manifest in a nearly universal lack of employee benefits such as healthcare, disability insurance, paid time off, or pensions. Furthermore, farmworkers seldom access public contribution- and need-based safety net programs including Social Security, Medicaid,

food stamps and workers compensation (Oxfam America 2004:15). This is of heightened significance given that agricultural work is one of the most dangerous occupations in the U.S. with a death rate almost six times higher than that of other industries. In 2002 alone, for example, there were 730 agricultural deaths and another 150,000 disabling injuries (López 2007:128). Likewise, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) estimates that 300,000 farmworkers suffer pesticide poisoning each year through spray drift or working in recently sprayed fields. Long-term pesticide exposure has been conclusively linked to sterility, skin disease, neurological damage and more than thirty types of cancer (López 2007:133). These factors have stark effects on farmworkers' long-term health according to a 2001 study by researchers from the University of California. “As we see it,” they conclude, “the lifestyle of farmworkers, which is driven by work and poverty, translates into a deterioration of their health status due to poor access to care, a failure of preventive education, and their own diets” (López 2007:140).

Farmworker poverty is also linked to overcrowding and other manifestations of substandard living conditions. These factors led one expert to assess that, “farmworkers are among the worst-housed groups in the United States” (Oxfam America 2004:21). In Immokalee, landlords prey on workers – most of whom do not own cars and must live near the town center in order to find work – by charging astronomically inflated rents for dilapidated trailers. The combination of rock-bottom wages and sky-high rents virtually guarantees overcrowding, often among complete strangers, as workers struggle to make ends meet. Journalist Barry Estabrook accurately describes run-of-the-mill conditions:

In one ten-foot-square space there were five mattresses, three directly on the floor, two suspended above on sheets of flimsy plywood. . . . The kitchen consisted of a table, four plastic chairs, an apartment-size stove, a sink with a dripping faucet, and a rusty refrigerator whose door wouldn't close. Bare lightbulbs hung from fixtures, and a couple of fans put up a noisy, futile effort against the stale heat and humidity. In a region where temperatures regularly climb into the nineties, there were no air conditioners. One tiny, dank bathroom served ten men. The rent was \$2,000 a month—as much as you would pay for a clean little condo near Naples.<sup>37</sup>

Leonel, a 21-year-old CIW member from Huehuetenango, Guatemala, who has worked in rural communities throughout the Midwest and eastern U.S., matter-of-factly describes the constellation of forces that shape Immokalee. “It's probably the worst place I've been – miserable wages, exorbitant rents, and bosses who don't care about your life. There's no time for relaxation or eating well.” He adds, “There's no sick days. You can even be enslaved. When someone arrives in Immokalee, you don't have any support or know the lay of the land. You're simply on your own.”

### Racial Formation and Southern Agriculture

In his acclaimed analysis of structural violence in Haiti, Dr. Paul Farmer urges ethnographers to analyze systems of oppression with a lens that is both “historically deep and geographically broad.” He contends, “Those who look only to the past to explain the ethnographically visible will miss the webs of living power that enmesh witnessed misery . . . [while] those who look only to powerful present-day actors to explain misery will fail to see how inequality is structured and legitimated over time” (2004:309). Heeding his call, my ethnography assesses not just the present moment but also the “construction materials” used to structure and legitimate Florida farm labor relations over time. For

this task, I employ theories of *racial formation* and *hegemony*. Michael Omi and Howard

Winant define racial formation as:

The sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed. . . . First, we argue that racial formation is a process of historically situated *projects* in which human bodies and social structures are represented and organized. Next, we link racial formation to the evolution of hegemony, the way in which society is organized and ruled. (1994:55-56)

Racial projects distribute resources – such as capital, land, and state power – along racial lines. The material organization of bodies and resources is supported by an ideological project, *hegemony*, that normalizes the prevailing social order (Gramsci 1971). As both an outcome and process, hegemony requires a shifting balance between coercion and consent. By synthesizing these theories, we begin to understand how hegemonic views of race become commonsense or “a way of comprehending, explaining, and acting in the world” (Omi and Winant 1994:60). We may also trace how hegemonic racial projects adapt over time and space.

For Omi and Winant, the conquest of the Americas represents the epochal event that initiates modern racial awareness. Chattel slavery and the expulsion of indigenous peoples from their lands created a racially organized structure of exploitation that permeated the economic, political, and cultural fabric of the Americas. In this context, slavery was to provide a permanent labor supply for large-scale agricultural enterprise throughout the hemisphere (Foner 1982). In the U.S., this system of slave-based plantation agriculture took root in the South, although strictly policed racial boundaries demarcated the national body politic. As the colonial social structures solidified, “the

balance of coercion and consent began to change. In this transition, hegemonic forms of racial rule – those based on consent – eventually came to supplant those based on coercion” (Omi and Winant 1994:67). In 1865, the legal institution of slavery ended with the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. constitution. Millions of black workers who had previously toiled in captivity throughout the South were thrust, at least nominally, into the nation's “free” labor supply. What would become of both the workers and jobs that had been racially coded since before the inception of the U.S.?

Following the Civil War, the egalitarian experiment of Reconstruction collapsed by 1877 due, in part, to the federal government's unwillingness to redistribute land to former slaves. In his study of the period, Manning Marable finds that five percent of white farmers still controlled over forty percent of productive agricultural land in most southern counties in 1870 (1991:6). The majority of freed slaves persisted in serf-like subordination throughout the region, denied the opportunity to own or develop profitable farms or other economic institutions. Following the biracial electoral uprising associated with the Populist Party, the region's emerging industrialists collaborated with the planter class to roll back popular gains and re-subordinate blacks and poor whites (Korstad 2003; Marable 1991). Throughout Dixie, it seemed, traditional social order would be restored and maintained by any means necessary.

Correspondingly, the ideology of white supremacy soon became inscribed in post-slavery institutions such as lynching, segregation, and the convict lease system. Convict leasing in particular became a not-so-subtle means of controlling black labor, maintaining

profitable agricultural enterprises, and industrializing the region. Postbellum revisions of the Slave Codes constructed expansive new spheres of black criminality that included the possession of firearms, breach of job contracts, absence from work, and “vagrancy” (not being able to prove one's employment status at a given moment). These laws were used in combination with a key exception in the Thirteenth Amendment which outlawed involuntary servitude “except as punishment for crime.” In turn, hundreds of thousands of former slaves across the South were sentenced to forced labor, “sometimes on the very plantations that previously had thrived on slave labor” (Davis 2003:29; Lichtenstein 1996). Douglass Blackmon proposes in *Slavery by Another Name* that, “Where mob violence or the Ku Klux Klan terrorized black citizens periodically, the return of forced labor as a fixture in black life ground pervasively into the daily lives of far more African Americans” (2008:7).

Following the abolition of slavery, southern agriculture remained a racial project grounded in the exploitation of black bodies. Convict leasing provided an answer to the post-slavery “conundrum of farm labor management” by ensuring a vast supply of low- and no-wage black workers for the regions' large-scale farms (Blackmon 2008:120). Using convicts to fill needs unmet by free labor created strong downward pressure on wages and working conditions for all workers in the South. It also served the cultural function of “strengthening the walls of white supremacy” as the South transitioned from slavery to the Jim Crow racial caste system (Oshinsky 1996:57). In this pivotal moment, the convict lease was in some ways more insidious than previous regimes of coercion and

restraint. One white planter commented in 1883, “Before the war we owned the negroes. If a man had a good nigger, he could afford to take care of him. . . . But these convicts: we don't own 'em. One dies, get another” (Mancini 1996:3). By 1915, convict leasing only continued in Florida and Alabama. At a phosphate mine in Citrus County, Florida, over eighty prisoners died in 1899 alone. The body count, excessive even by the era's standards, prompted a federal investigation that reported, “a system of cruelty and inhumanity . . . that it would be hard to realize unless it could be seen and heard direct” (Mancini 1996:191). Meanwhile, “turpentine labor” in the state's twenty million acres of virgin pine forests was also sourced from Florida's penal system until the state abolished the leasing of prisoners in 1923 (Oshinsky 1996:75-76). The hegemonic view of black bodies as economically disposable encouraged forms of hyper-exploitation that resulted in high rates of worker injury and premature death.

Peonage and extralegal violence further constricted black prospects for freedom. Lien laws and contract labor laws reinforced white control of rural black labor by making it difficult – sometimes impossible – for workers to escape from exploitative farm tenancy arrangements. Historian Pete Daniel finds that by 1900, the debt-labor system of peonage “infected the South like a cancer, eating away at the economic freedom of blacks . . . and preserving the class structure inherited from slavery days” (1990:11). In 1907, black feminist and educator Mary Church Terrell astutely noted that, “the connection between disenfranchisement and peonage is intimate and close” (Mancini 1996:196). From poll taxes to segregation, black workers were hemmed in on nearly all sides.



Predictably, the small but powerful sector of white southerners that had grown fat off their labor were not going to wean themselves or surrender their privileges voluntarily.

When blacks protested unfair conditions – in effect questioning the political and cultural economy of white supremacy – they met fierce and violent repression. In 1872, for example, several African Americans testified to Congress that plantation owners in northern Florida used the Ku Klux Klan to target farm laborers who demanded higher wages (Ortiz 2002). Lynch law, organized by local elites, enjoyed broad support among white southerners of all class backgrounds (Ingalls 1988). Manning Marable calculates that over 2,000 African Americans were lynched between 1882 and 1903. Men, women, and children “were burned alive at the stake; others were castrated with axes or knives, blinded with hot pokers, or decapitated” (Marable 1991:9). Lynching rates reached fever pitch during the 1890s and continued for several decades thereafter. In fact, Florida had the highest number of blacks lynched per capita in the U.S. during the first half of the twentieth century, and more than a few of these two hundred deaths were linked to labor disputes (Ingalls 1988; Mormino 2005; Shoffner 1981). Oscillating between coercion and consent, these techniques of social control would soon configure a uniquely modern form of agricultural labor.

### The Creation of the East Coast Migrant Stream

As the nineteenth century drew to a close, sweeping transformations were taking place on New Jersey's farms that would have major implications for rural black workers

in the Southeast. Unable to compete with cheap grains imported from western states, many New Jersey farmers began to switch to truck farming in the late nineteenth century to meet the rapidly growing fruit and vegetable demands of nearby New York, Newark, and Philadelphia. As labor historian Cindy Hahamovitch (1997) chronicles, the new practice spread down the Atlantic Coast. Transportation technologies improved, and soon growers shipped their produce to distant urban markets in refrigerated railway cars. In the 1920s, truck farming took root in south Florida after the government-supported drainage of the Everglades opened hundreds of thousands of acres of land for agricultural use. At first the mucky soil proved disappointing. In 1928, however, the Everglades Experiment Station discovered that with the addition of copper sulphate, the soil could bear three consecutive bumper crops while northern farms remained buried under snow (Grubbs 1961). Modern agriculture – a new era in Florida's economic development – incorporated “the most powerful themes propelling the state's growth: displacement and resettlement, increasing specialization and the concentration of capital, and new levels of consolidation and scale” (Mormino 2005:185-186).

Unlike other East Coast states, the large amount of capital needed for drainage, irrigation, and fertilizers restricted Florida's winter vegetable industry to large-scale growers from the onset. This led to the rise of powerful oligopolies, as documented half a century ago in a report commissioned by the U.S. government. It suggests that, “The pattern of land ownership and control, and the corresponding labor-employer relations in Florida, resemble in many ways those of California. . . . Intensive agriculture has come

under the control of large integrated producing units, at the expense of small independent growers” (Jamieson 1945:327). The Jeffersonian yeoman ideal was quickly eliminated from the market as large-scale operators seized control of winter vegetable production. These grower-shippers dreamed of building their empires from the mucky Florida soil provided they could find ample workers to harvest their beans, tomatoes, sugarcane, and other crops.

Similar to California's “factories in the fields” (McWilliams 1939), Florida commercial growers needed large numbers of workers willing to accept difficult, short-term employment. The industry in Florida, and the U.S. more broadly, came to rely on impoverished and vulnerable workers. Sunshine State growers soon found their labor pool thanks to the boll weevil and the dramatic collapse of farm commodity prices after World War I. This dual calamity displaced massive numbers of African American farm tenants from Georgia and other nearby states. During this restructuring, Florida emerged as the southernmost point in a coastwise migration stream with permanently mobile harvest workers traveling seasonally as far north as New Jersey. Hahamovitch recounts that, “The considerable distance involved in the circuit led to increased dependence on crewleaders, who became more exploitative as they became more necessary. It was during this long depression that the East Coast migrant stream took its present form and character” (1997:114).

African Americans displaced by economic crisis soon comprised the vast majority of Atlantic Coast migrant farmworkers. Accordingly:

The buying and selling of [migrant farm] labor was thus intimately bound up with notions of race. White planters in the South frequently expressed the belief that black people worked less the more they were paid. This “planters' theory of value” was all the more powerful (and long lived) because it combined their belief in the “natural” inferiority of African Americans with “natural” laws of economics. Any increase in wages seemed unnatural – *proof of a world turned upside down*. What mattered in this climate . . . [was] growers' perceptions of labor supply, what might be called the ideology of labor scarcity. (Hahamovitch, 1997:82, emphasis added)

Florida grower-shippers embraced the “planters' theory of value.” Rather than providing incentives to attract a reliable albeit seasonal workforce – which would require discarding deeply-held assumptions about the fundamental worth of black labor – growers constructed a labor market that relied on and maintained an abundant supply of low-wage workers. In a striking parallel to earlier attitudes held about leased convicts, one Florida grower bluntly remarked in Edward R. Murrow's 1960 televised documentary, *Harvest of Shame*, “We used to own our slaves. Now we just rent them.”<sup>38</sup>

Multiple forms of abuse were deeply woven into this system and took on extra significance given ongoing anti-black violence throughout the South during most of the twentieth century. In 1942, for example, the federal government indicted the U.S. Sugar Corporation and four of its managers for violating peonage statutes (Wilkinson 1989). African Americans recruited from nearby states were forbidden to leave U.S. Sugar labor camps deep in the Everglades. Shoffner writes, “Workers were told if they tried to leave on the sugar trains, which the company owned, they would be shot. . . . A number of men escaped by swimming rivers, wading canals, and crossing the fields” (1981:416). During World War II growers and local law enforcement subjected farmworkers to “work-fight-

or-jail” campaigns as punishment for vagrancy (Shoffner 1981).

Farmworker living conditions throughout the state were equally deplorable. In 1952, the director of the Palm Beach County Health Department testified to the U.S. Senate labor subcommittee that Florida's migrant shelters were “hygienically unfit for cattle” (Grubbs 1961:117). Predictably, the agriculture industry opposed any move resembling “federal interference” on behalf of migrant workers. One Florida grower explained, “If you think I'm going to pay these niggers for working, and then pay social security to the government, too, you're crazy” (Grubbs 1961:116). In 1965, the piece rate for tomatoes was twelve cents per bucket; that same year, the average U.S. farmer “enjoyed the highest realized net income in history,” according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.<sup>39</sup> White Florida growers profited in large part due to their ability to hold down predominantly black harvesters' wages.

Enabled by robust profit margins and Green Revolution agricultural practices, growers rapidly expanded their operations throughout Florida<sup>40</sup> Farm income, “long the backbone of Florida's economy,” roughly doubled between 1950 and 1960,<sup>41</sup> providing an estimated 100,000 migrant and non-migrant agricultural jobs.<sup>42</sup> Between 1960 and 1980, Florida ranked only behind California in vegetable production as its output of fresh market tomatoes tripled. During this period there was a significant transfer in tomato acreage from Miami-Dade and Alachua to Collier and Lee counties (Stronge 2008:209). “America's appetite for fruits and vegetables opened new sections of Florida for intensive cultivation. None was more remote than Immokalee” (Mormino 2005:209). As tomato

production shifted southwest, Immokalee – an area inhabited by Seminole and Mikasuki Indians until 1870 – began to assume greater importance as a statewide agricultural hub. This trend began in the 1940s but accelerated significantly by the early 1960s (Williams and Loret de Mola 2006). That decade the number of migrant labor camps in Collier County soared from 15 to 284 as the county's estimated peak migrant population reached nearly 19,000 according to the Florida Department of Health.<sup>43</sup> By the 1990s, two winter vegetable empires – Gargiulo, Inc. and Six L's – based their operations in Immokalee, and Florida claimed 30 of the nation's 400 largest farms (Mormino 2005:210). Without question, low-wage migrant labor underwrote the growth of commercial agriculture in the Sunshine State. These exploited bodies were as essential to the industry's success as the discovery of copper sulphate's use as a fertilizer in 1928.

### **“Latinization” of the Workforce**

In the last three decades of the twentieth century, the demographics of the East Coast migrant labor stream changed considerably. This initially began with the federal government's decision – at the behest of growers – to import Puerto Rican, Jamaican and Bahamian laborers during World War II (Hahamovitch 1997). However the proportion of black farmworkers dropped sharply throughout the 1970s due in part to new occupational opportunities opened up by the achievements of the civil rights movement. As African American workers left southern fields en masse for urban areas, substantial numbers of Latin American and Caribbean immigrants began to arrive. Since 1987, more Latin

American immigrants than African Americans have worked in East Coast agriculture as the demand for hand-harvesters on large farms increases and the influx of immigrants continues (Holt and Mattern 2002).

Immigration has profoundly if subtly transformed the economic and cultural landscapes of the South.<sup>44</sup> Greg Asbed of the CIW relates that, “From the watermelon fields of Kennet, Missouri, to the tobacco farms of Clinton, North Carolina, recent immigrants from Mexico and Central America hold a growing majority of the local economy's back-breaking, low-paying jobs” (2008:5). This shift has resulted in a “strategically diversified labor force” that allows farm employers to reinforce markers of ethnic and racial difference as a method of labor control (Hahamovitch 1997). Adapting hegemonic racial understandings to new demographic realities, growers have welcomed Latin American immigrants, believing they work harder and more reliably for less money than “shiftless” African Americans.

It is not my aim to provide a detailed analysis of all the factors driving migration from Latin American and Caribbean communities to Immokalee, however it is important to at least outline the larger forces at play. In terms of Immokalee's Haitian community, they arrived in two distinct waves: one in the early 1980s and another in the early 1990s. The first migration was driven mostly by economic hardship; the second followed the violent coup against the presidency of Jean Bertrand Aristide in September 1991 and the ensuing repression against his support base. More than a few Haitians that arrived in Immokalee during the second wave of so-called “boat people” were highly experienced

community organizers that soon helped form the embryonic nucleus of the CIW. One such person is Matye Beaucicot. On a July afternoon in 2008, a mutual friend translated for us as he told me his story in Creole:

In Haiti, I raised corn, peanuts, and millet. In the 1980s I joined a small peasant group (*Gwoupman*) and participated in cooperative economic activities and a Catholic Church-based popular literacy campaign (*Misyon Alfa*). Once Jean-Claude Duvalier fled the island in 1986, I became more politically active in the peasant movement and became a delegate for the National Front for Democratic Change [the coalition behind Aristide's election in February 1991]. Following the coup, anyone who had been public supporter had to leave. So we took a little boat and got out in November. If I had stayed, I wouldn't be alive today. The next day, the Coast Guard picked us up and took us to Guantánamo, Cuba. We soon learned we qualified for political asylum in the U.S.

In Immokalee, Matye worked in the tomato fields and at a nursery before being elected to the CIW staff at a general assembly in 2000. Today the affable 53-year old coordinates the Coalition's co-op that sells staple food items to the community at wholesale cost.

In the mid-1980s, a growing number of rural, indigenous Guatemalans also made their way to Florida fleeing political unrest and violence (Burns 1993). The small Central American country with an indigenous majority had been rocked by civil war since the U.S.-organized coup against the presidency of Jacobo Arbenz in 1954. In the early 1980s, however, the conflict intensified severely when the Guatemalan military launched a “scorched earth campaign” to root out the guerilla movement along with its urban and rural allies. In the span of a few years known as *la violencia* (the violence), the military committed 626 massacres, burning villages completely off the map in what historian Greg Grandin calls, “perhaps the cruelest campaign of state repression in twentieth-century Latin America” (2004:74). The losses inside the country of nine million people



were apocalyptic: one and a half million Guatemalans were displaced and another 200,000 were killed or disappeared. In 1999, the U.N.-sanctioned Commission for Historical Clarification identified 83 percent of the victims as Maya and attributed blame for 93 percent of the human rights violations to the Guatemalan military. The violence was so systematic and severe the Commission labeled it “genocidal” (Sanford 2005).

Although many Guatemalans came to Immokalee to escape *la violencia*, the steady influx continued even after the signing of the country's peace accords in 1996. To understand this migration, we must turn our attention to the processes of global economic integration that swept the hemisphere following the 1982 debt crisis. Scholars Eric Hershberg and Fred Rosen suggest that, “Since the early 1980s, financial security has replaced social security as a policy goal; social inequality has grown; income has been redistributed upward; and, to lower the costs of doing business, the working poor have deliberately been deprived of economic opportunities and social mobility” (2006:7). Geographer David Harvey labels this political-economic trend *neoliberalism*, the notion that, “the social good will be maximized by maximizing the reach and frequency of market transactions” (2005:3-4).<sup>45</sup>

Bowing to the pressures of the U.S. government and financial institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, Latin American governments opened their economies to foreign investment, privatized public enterprises, and rolled back state services throughout the 1980s and 1990s. “This 'opening,'” Hershberg and Rosen (2006) continue, “has stripped the subordinate classes of their old social protections (meager as

they may have been) and welcomed a new era of social discipline” (7). In Guatemala and southern Mexico, these changes coincided with the collapse of international coffee prices, undermining a previously critical source of income for many *campesinos* (farmworkers) at the very moment the state eviscerated its social safety net.<sup>46</sup> Relating this narrative back to Immokalee, the mostly young men now migrating to the U.S. are not uprooted by overt physical violence but rather economic restructuring, much like black sharecroppers were three generations ago. They confront “the impossibility of sustaining oneself in one's own land on one's own terms” (Hershberg and Rosen 2006:23). As Leonel put it to me last summer, “I was not going to die of hunger in Guatemala, but I was definitely not going to improve my situation either. I took a chance and came here.”

Unlike Leonel, however, the majority of Immokalee's farmworkers migrate from Mexico. Small numbers of Mexican and Mexican-American families came to southwest Florida by way of Texas in the 1950s, however a much larger population began arriving in the 1970s as the long-term crisis of the Mexican peasantry worsened. Sociologist Gilbert Gonzalez interprets that, “Mexican migration – braceros, guest workers, legal or illegal – cannot be explained apart from the actions and consequences of U.S. capital across the social evolution of the Mexican nation” (2006:221). Accordingly, four related developments have undermined rural subsistence farming in Mexico over the past half century: the introduction of Green Revolution agricultural practices in the 1940s; the privatization of collective *ejido* lands to pave the way for the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA); the trade agreement itself; and the subsequent penetration of U.S.

agribusiness (Lopez 2007). Taken together, these factors are driving the largest wave of immigration in U.S. history.

The on-the-ground impact of neoliberal policies – such as the opening of farm commodity markets to U.S. competition – has been ruinous for Mexico's small farmers, particularly indigenous campesinos. Gonzalez further documents that, “Between the 1960s and 2000 Mexican migration increased tenfold, and most of that increase was recorded during the era of “free trade.” Practically all of the Mexican population has been affected; only 93 of Mexico's 2,443 municipalities currently have no migrants living and working in the United States” (2006:209). In NAFTA's first year alone, the Mexican agricultural ministry estimated that one million farmers left their land and predicted the rate of displacement would continue for the first fifteen years of the agreement (Lopez 2007). In her aptly titled book *Out of the Sea and Into the Fire*, journalist Kari Lyderson (2005) portrays a series of connections between neoliberal economic restructuring and the growing presence of immigrant workers in the U.S., including Immokalee.<sup>47</sup> Many CIW members are in fact from the hardest-hit communities in southern Mexico and are among the half-million Mexican indigenous people who now live and work in this country. (Dominguez-Santos 2009). Neoliberal trade policies and U.S. agribusiness are merely the latest fronts in a 500-year struggle against conquest and dispossession.<sup>48</sup>

Often as both migrants and indigenous people, displaced *campesinos* experience economic, social, and political exclusion (Fox and Rivera-Salgado 2004). Moreover, the conditions in Florida's fields today cannot be disentangled from the industry's history of

racialized labor practices. The twenty-first century exploitation of indigenous migrant workers has largely supplanted the twentieth century exploitation of African Americans. Operational commonalities between the labor regimes abound. Disenfranchisement silences contemporary immigrants as it did black workers until the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Ideologically, an updated planter's theory of value and racially coded discussions of opportunity-cost (which cast Global South migrants as colonial subjects) legitimate the systemic exploitation of immigrant farm labor (Maher 2002). I do not wish to exaggerate the degree of similarity or oversimplify the relation between African American and Latin American racial formations in the South; after all, growers have often highlighted such differences to undermine worker solidarity and collective action. For the purposes of this analysis, however, it is crucial to note the essential continuities between these past and present racial labor regimes.

While labor demographics have shifted, conditions in Florida's fields may actually be worsening. The same neoliberal economic forces displacing subsistence farmers in Mexico and Central America are also taking their toll on U.S. workplaces, worsening life for immigrant farmworkers once they arrive. Competition spurred by NAFTA squeezed smaller Florida tomato producers out of the market, resulting in further consolidation of the industry. Membership in the Florida Tomato Committee (FTC) – a body that accounts for nearly all of the state's tomato output – shrank from more than three hundred growers to seventy five over the last decade. In the words of industry spokesperson Reggie Brown, “I’m down to the mean ones” (Oxfam America 2004:36). In its analysis

of the industry, Oxfam America finds that the top five grower-shippers now account for 45% of Florida's volume of tomatoes shipped; the top ten account for 70%. "These shifts in market organization and function . . . have increased downward pressure on wages and heightened worker insecurity at the bottom of the fresh produce production chain" (Oxfam America 2004:26). The Oxfam report concludes that, "The wage levels, working environment and social conditions for farmworkers in America's fields remain virtually unchanged from where they stood close to fifty years ago, and in some areas have clearly deteriorated" (57).

Yet even as it faces consolidation on both ends of the production chain, the vital signs for Florida tomato growers are strong. According to the FTC, its members still produce virtually the entire U.S. supply of fresh market tomatoes from December through May each year. For the 2006-07 season, the 1.3 billion pound, hand-picked harvest required 39,000 acres of land and 33,000 workers during peak production periods; the total value at farm level exceeded \$403 million.<sup>49</sup> The success of the industry has even played a key role in transforming the Florida economy into the thirteenth largest in the world (Stronge 2008:238). All the while, Immokalee remains the production hub during the long winter months, the labor reserve that makes the harvest possible. In the final analysis, farm work endures as some of the most poorly compensated labor in the U.S., the charge of nonwhite bodies viewed as throwaway tools. As food politics writer Tom Philpott points out, "The process of harvesting tomatoes destined to be consumed fresh resists mechanization. The fruit is too fragile; only human hands can do the job. The

food industry's solution: treat human beings like machines.”<sup>50</sup> □

## Conclusion

In the early twenty-first century, farm labor conditions in Florida range from a norm of sweatshop-like exploitation – sub-poverty wages, precarious employment, no benefits whatsoever, and no right to basic legal protections such as overtime pay and collective bargaining – to an extreme of forced labor. Indeed, labor abuses, including servitude, have been an ever-present reality in Florida's fields since before the rise of large-scale grower-shippers. Hegemonic race and labor practices in the South played an essential role in the emergence and organization of the migrant farm labor market that agribusiness relied on to harvest its fruits and vegetables. These ideologies and practices continue to structure Florida agriculture in the neoliberal era even as Latin American immigrants have replaced African Americans in the migrant stream. As farmer and scholar Charles Thompson laments, “The pattern of farm labor and of rural dependency started with slavery and continued with sharecropping persists to this day and has become more transnational than ever” (2002:73). It is within this context that the Coalition of Immokalee Workers emerged, offering a bold alternative vision of human dignity to that of unending misery and degradation.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Organizing for Dignity, Dialogue and a Fair Wage

We are human beings, and we must be respected as such.

-- Cruz, CIW

In this movement, you never stop learning.

-- Gerardo Reyes, CIW

“I don't give a damn what you do. I'm gonna go get the 'tobacco help,” Jerry Taylor yelled into the phone before hanging up on me. It was about seven o'clock on a June evening, and the fifteen of us comprising the CIW's watermelon harvesting cooperative had been waiting to work – wasting time, really – since the early afternoon. Now the farmer whose crop we harvest had erupted into a fit of anger. Earlier that morning, Jerry informed us that a semi-trailer from Birmingham would arrive for a load of seeded watermelons around one or two o'clock. As the cooler morning gave way to a hot and sticky Florida afternoon, the crew of *sandilleros* (watermelon workers) cut the proper amount of ripe melons to complete a standard load – forty thousand pounds. We then loaded the melons, each weighing between twenty and thirty pounds, into several large, tractor-pulled wagons. The pace of work was quick, and everyone was in a jovial mood, cracking jokes as we filled four wagons with the heavy fruit. Afterwards, we took a brief lunch break, assured that the trailer would arrive any minute. Once that happened, a handful of us could “pack” – a skilled job requiring the careful yet rapid placement of

melons in the trailer so they do not break during transit – while the rest of the crew returned to the fields to cut and load.

Hour after hour, the trailer did not arrive. Jerry assured us multiple times that he had just spoken with the driver from Alabama and that he was almost here. Our crew was caught in an unpaid holding pattern, unable to work due to circumstances well beyond our control. Like most other fruits and vegetables, watermelon harvesting pays by the piece. In this case, we were earning two cents for every pound of melons that we cut, loaded, and packed or binned. On a good day, if all the variables lined up in our favor, we could make a decent wage, especially since as a worker cooperative we avoided crewleaders eager to appropriate a portion of our earnings. Instead, we divvied up the various managerial and logistical tasks amongst ourselves, made decisions collectively, and operated according to the principle of equal pay for equal work. The system was not only more democratic but also generated a higher quality outcome as every crew member was both invested in and responsible for the final product.

Even with this progressive model, however, we felt the pinch of a changing market. As retail demand for seedless watermelons increased throughout the 2000s, growers began to require larger crews to handle the extra tasks associated with seedless melons (namely, the practice of “binning” the fruit into grocery store-ready boxes that are moved by forklifts). Whereas in the heyday of seeded melons a crew could do quite well with eight members, a crew now needs twice as many workers due to the prevalence of seedless melons. Given the extra materials involved such as cardboard boxes and



wooden pallets, retailers pay growers a higher price for seedless melons. Growers, however, pay harvesting crews the same piece rate they always have. It is the workers who ultimately absorb the costs of extra labor. Over a period of five years, we watched our seasonal earnings dramatically decline, underscoring the very real impact of large-scale purchasing practices on farmworkers' livelihoods.

This reality was never far from our mind as we worked day in and day out for Jerry under the blazing hot sun, retiring in the evening to sleep in cramped, cheap motel rooms as he drove to his comfortable two-story home. While we knew the corporations were the greatest beneficiaries – after all, the Campaign for Fair Food is a distillation of this very analysis – we also knew that Jerry profited much more from the arrangement than we ever would. Operating in an amorphous and unorganized labor market, we had little ability to change the rules of the game. At the very least, however, we demanded respect as workers, as human beings. We demanded that our labor – the prerequisite for his wealth – be accorded a degree of dignity. On this day, Jerry violated our implicit agreement.

All told, we waited for more than seven hours for the trailer to arrive. Since no watermelons had shipped, we had yet to earn a single penny even though we had been working since sunrise. At seven o'clock, after an internal discussion, we decided to cut our losses and head back to the motel in Gainesville for the evening. As one of a few English-speakers on the crew, I called Jerry to inform him of our decision. Infuriated that we dared to leave before packing the trailer (which was still missing in action), he then

proceeded to question our work ethic. After a back-and-forth exchange, he yelled that he would get the “tobacco help” – local Latino immigrants he hired to harvest his tobacco – and abruptly hung up the phone. At this point, we faced a crossroads. On the one hand, we risked permanently ending our work relationship with Jerry if we left without packing the trailer, assuming it arrived. On the other hand, we had wasted an entire day and earned little to nothing. Instead of acknowledging this, Jerry berated us and then implied that anyone, including the “tobacco help,” could pack a trailer in the nighttime darkness. The statement not only dripped of old-school racism but also denigrated the skill necessary for packing, itself a dying art in the age of mindlessly binning seedless melons.

We sat inside the CIW's fifteen passenger van, shaded by some oaks, and assessed the increasingly unpleasant situation. There was a general acceptance of the possibility of “lost days” when one works in agriculture; the other crew members understood this from all-to-familiar experiences in Immokalee and elsewhere. It is a tolerable if undesirable aspect of the job. Instead, the main problem we identified was Jerry's profoundly disrespectful attitude, a crass sense of entitlement that had been growing over the course of the three weeks we had worked for him. His explosion that evening was the outgrowth of his general approach to dealing with the “watermelon help,” as he surely referred to us in polite company. Should we swallow our pride and at least protect our job security for the next few weeks? Or was it more important to remind him how we expected to be treated as workers?

We debated back and forth for thirty minutes. Finally, from the back of the

sweaty van, Cruz, a pensive young man from Huehuetenango who joined the Coalition staff in 2006, yelled out, “*¡Tenemos dignidad! Hacemos una huelga y vamos a la pinche casa.*” (We have dignity! Let's strike and go to the damn motel.) That pretty much settled the discussion; we knew what we had to do. It was not a strike over wages and working conditions in the classic sense; rather it was a reassertion of our dignity and a reminder to Jerry of the valuable skills that we brought to the job. We said goodbye – perhaps forever – to Brantley, Jerry's old “hired man,” who snorted knowingly when we told him that we were leaving it to the tobacco crew to pack, and then we took off down the tree-lined farm roads to Gainesville. With the music turned up loud and the windows down, we were celebratory and confident in our decision even if unsure about the future.

The strike lasted of all of fifteen hours. By ten o'clock the next morning – after Jerry realized we were not showing up and the tobacco crew was unwilling to scab (to our benefit, watermelons is a notoriously difficult line of work) – he called us to make amends. It was not an easy process for him. After all, it ran counter to the very essence of farm labor relations in Florida: “the tractor does not tell the farmer how to run the farm.”<sup>51</sup> We loaded our coolers with water and ice, stopped at the grocery store to buy lunch, and made our triumphant return to Jerry Taylor's watermelon farm. We caught some grief from the trailer driver from Birmingham, which was hardly surprising, considering by his age that he was a young man during the hottest days of the civil rights movement and most likely sided with Bull Connor. He had finally arrived at ten o'clock in the evening and was upset that we were not waiting for him. (Even a trailer driver sees

himself as part of the white male supervisory structure we encountered everyday on the thin basis of his race.) With Jerry, however, we experienced a night and day difference in his attitude towards us, at least outwardly. Through our refusal, we had won the point that all labor has dignity.

Underlying the CIW's ethos is the same unwavering emphasis on the fundamental dignity and agency of farmworkers. Indeed, the very existence of the organization is an ontological challenge to both an industry that views workers as disposable tools as well as traditional advocates accustomed to speaking on their behalf. Given that, this chapter has three aims. I begin by surveying Florida farmworker advocacy and organizing prior to the CIW. I then explore the formation of the Coalition, focusing on its methodological translation from Latin American and Caribbean popular movements. Lastly, I analyze the key components of this approach: popular education, leadership development, and protest actions. In doing so, I review the Coalition's major activities from 1993 through 2000 and assess its ongoing local organizing practices.

### Survey of Florida Farmworker Advocacy and Organizing

Historically, efforts to improve the lot of Florida farmworkers fall into three broad categories: worker organizing; church-based advocacy and charity; and legal services. A sparse trail of worker organizing dates back to the earliest days of migrant agricultural work in the state. During World War I, for example, African American potato workers in northern Florida organized themselves to attain higher wages amidst a tightening labor

market; these endeavors, however, were stymied by police repression and the post-war economic downturn (Ortiz 2002). Farmworkers made a similar push during World War II, but their advances were undermined when growers won government support for importing Bahamian, Jamaican and Puerto Rican laborers (Hahamovitch 1997). All told, sustained farmworker organizing failed to take root in Florida for a number of reasons:

Militant agricultural-labor unionism comparable to that of California was slow to develop because of the relative newness of this agricultural system and the more depressed and insecure position of the migrants. Also, there were no strong urban labor movements to support a campaign to organize for agriculture. Finally, a continuous heavy influx of surplus rural workers from adjoining Southern States contributed to chronic oversupplies of farm laborers in many intensive crop areas of Florida during the thirties. These made labor relationships exceedingly casual and insecure, depressed the earnings of workers to low levels, and weakened their bargaining power. Unionism, strikes and other collective action, in brief, have been almost completely absent in Florida's commercialized vegetable and field crops. (Jamieson 1945:327-28)

Compounding these obstacles, agricultural workers and domestic workers were excluded from the National Labor Relations Act by presidential executive order in 1935, as noted earlier, thus assuring southern growers that the labor protections of the New Deal would not empower black workers in the rural South.

The region became even more inhospitable for labor and civil rights organizing as the postwar rhetoric of anticommunism stifled movements for progressive social change. “The Cold War's crushing assaults undercut organizing and uncoupled unions from the civil rights struggle . . . leaving the black working poor with few champions,” argues historian Michael Honey (2007:22). In 1952, for example, when organizations including the AFL-CIO and Methodist Women's Society of Christian Service lobbied Congress to

extend National Labor Rights Act protections to farmworkers, a member of a Florida growers' association declared that the proposal came from “theorists and persons who would lead this Nation down the road to state socialism” (Grubbs 1961:119). Another industry spokesperson found the legislation altogether unnecessary since Florida farmworkers “weren't depressed as compared with the standards of living of most of the people of the world” (Grubbs 1961:118). Swallowed whole by the agribusiness lobby, the bill suffered ignominious defeat.

During this period, a number of advocacy projects attempted to address the material needs of Florida's farmworkers. One such body was the Florida Christian Migrant Ministry (FCMN), an interdenominational group created in 1939 to coordinate service and advocacy efforts on behalf of farmworkers. In 1967, FCMN spearheaded a statewide coalition of labor, community and faith-based groups that unsuccessfully lobbied the state legislature for reforms including farmworker coverage under minimum wage and workers compensation laws. In 1969, undoubtedly influenced by the upsurge of social movement activity around the nation, FCMN dipped its toes in the waters of community organizing. The Florida Farm Workers Organization, based in central Florida and directed by FCMN staffers, had a membership base of about 150 mostly African American workers and successfully integrated a local packinghouse. Afterwards, it turned its attention to getting local streets paved and improving health services to the farmworker community. The organization, however, was unable to tackle the broader issues of wages and working conditions and appears to have had little longevity.<sup>52</sup>

In 1971, fresh off its historic grape boycott victory in California, the United Farm Workers (UFW) decided to try their luck in Florida. Eliseo Medina, the union's Florida director, explained, "The situation with farm workers in Florida is one of the worst in the nation. . . . There are an estimated 150,000 farm workers in Florida. . . . Florida is the key state in the nation now." By February 1972, after eight months of negotiations, the UFW signed a three-year contract for 1,200 citrus grove workers with Coca-Cola, owner of Minute Maid. However only one grower, Boston-based Hood and Sons Dairy, followed suit. By November, the UFW was threatening an industry-wide citrus boycott. Yet faced with mounting grower resistance in California (and the associated Teamster sweetheart contracts) and legislative setbacks in Arizona, the union was hardly positioned to wage a simultaneous battle with Florida agribusiness. For their part, the Florida Farm Bureau publicly likened UFW president César Chávez to Adolph Hitler, Stalin, Mao Tse-tung, "and other less than admirable human beings." Eventually, the UFW lost its battle with Coca Cola. Presently the union maintains a nominal presence in northern Florida, but it has not meaningfully organized workers in the state since 1973 and currently has no contracts.<sup>53</sup>

Arguably, the UFW's early efforts spilled over and inspired a brief period of labor mobilization in southwest Florida. In December 1976, nearly 250 workers, led by the social service-oriented United Migrants Association, threatened to strike in Immokalee.<sup>54</sup> In January, a walk-out was met with police repression, resulting in the arrest of 39 workers on trespassing charges. A harsh winter freeze then destroyed most of the fruit

and vegetable crops and undercut the organizing momentum.<sup>55</sup> In December 1978, tomato pickers outside Homestead unsuccessfully struck to raise the piece rate from 40 to 45 cents per bucket.<sup>56</sup> Generally speaking, these workplace actions failed since growers could easily find workers willing to accept prevailing wages. Likewise, the organizations spearheading these actions were not indigenous to the communities they operated in and did little to develop farmworker leadership. Unsuccessful protests reinforced suspicions about the efficacy of farmworker collective action, and these organizations, for all intents and purposes, soon gave up the struggle.

From the late 1970s throughout the 1980s, Florida Rural Legal Services (FRLS) and a handful of charities dominated the terrain of farmworker advocacy in Immokalee and the rest of the state. FRLS was founded in 1966 as a branch of the Legal Services Corporation, itself a part of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society vision. According to the legal services model, "the problem of farmworker exploitation is approached as a series of legal violations to be remedied, usually by legal action and occasionally, when the advocates were feeling frisky, by political or media pressure" (Asbed 2008:12). FRLS filed thousands of suits against growers and crewleaders for violations of minimum wage laws and other protections; they also pressed the Florida Department of Labor to improve its services to farmworkers.□<sup>57</sup>

Despite the deluge of lawsuits and the dollar amount of damages won, the legal advocate model failed to generate enough public, political, or financial pressure to persuade the growers to implement systemic labor reforms. Unable to raise the wage



floor, change the terms of debate, or challenge deep power imbalances, legal services represented, at best, a piecemeal enforcement strategy for pre-existing laws. In addition, it was controlled by professionals unaccountable to the communities for whom they spoke (Jenkins 2002). In 1996, FRLS was barred from representing undocumented workers, further diminishing its relevance in Immokalee (Bowe 2007).

Resistant to reform and divided along ethnic lines, Immokalee was largely without hope in the early 1990s, a forgotten town notable to recently arrived immigrants for the pervasive sense of alienation it engendered. Stagnant wages and violent crew bosses reinforced the despair, pitting one immigrant group against another. A few social service providers – the Friendship House, Guadalupe Social Services, and Redlands Christian Migrant Association – provided a last-ditch safety net, but systemic, community-led change seemed beyond the realm of possibility. Thanks to a confluence of circumstances and the vision of an initially small band of workers, this would soon change.

### Toolkits and Translations: The Formation of the CIW

Several sympathetic scholars (Fine 2006; Jenkins 2002; Patton 2008; Zugman 2008) describe the Coalition of Immokalee Workers as a *worker center*. Janice Fine, a leading researcher on the topic, defines these centers as “community-based mediating institutions” that provide support to low-wage workers through a combination of organizing with service and advocacy (2006:2). With support from foundations, the number of these groups has increased significantly over the past fifteen years, totaling

137 in 2005. The centers are incredibly diverse in terms of their constituencies and programs, and while they share many important aspects with the CIW – such as a commitment to popular education and leadership development – the label conceals the CIW's particularity within the U.S. organizing landscape. Instead, I contend the Coalition is more accurately viewed as a *peasant* movement within the United States – a place popularly imagined as devoid of a peasantry. Its philosophical antecedents are not labor unions, social service providers, or non-profits, as is the case with most workers centers. Rather, the Coalition's genetic code traces back to popular movements in rural Haiti, Mexico, and Guatemala.

The CIW represents a translation of specific technologies of resistance to a new terrain, a “reverse technology transfer” to be precise (Asbed 6: 2008). In this sense, my study can be read alongside *The Maya of Morganton* in which Leon Fink detects “a hint of transnational peasant wisdom” in Guatemalan workers' unionization struggle at a North Carolina poultry plant in the late 1990s (2003:4). In their analysis of the Oaxacan Indigenous Binational Front (FIOB), Jonathan Fox and Gaspar Rivera-Salgado similarly note, “indigenous Mexicans bring with them a wide range of experiences with collective action for community development, social justice and political democratization, and these repertoires influence their own decisions about who to work with and how to build their own organizations in the United States” (2004:5). Sketching out this conveyance is crucial to explaining the CIW's unlikely success mobilizing workers for community-led change in hardscrabble Immokalee.

The story begins inauspiciously in 1992 when a group of Haitian, Mexican and Guatemalan workers and two organizing-minded FRLS staffers (Greg Asbed and Laura Germino) came together to explore initiating a community organizing process in Immokalee. Asbed recalls, “These workers were determined to find solutions to some of the most pressing problems facing the Immokalee farmworker community and to do so they decided it would be necessary to 'unpack' their organizing experience from their home countries and put it to use here in Florida” (2008:6). They called themselves the Southwest Florida Farmworker Project (SFFP) and started meeting in a borrowed room at the Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church. Fortuitously, several Haitian members and Asbed were trained educators in the *Mouvman Peyizan Papay* (Peasant Movement of Papay, or MPP), Haiti's largest peasant organization and part of the popular *dechoukaj* (uprooting) that ended Jean-Claude Duvalier's dictatorial reign in 1986.<sup>58</sup> Other members had similar backgrounds in *campesino* organizations in Guatemala and southern Mexico, both drawing on their countries' rich legacies of rural activism.

The *campo* (countryside) was an archetypal site of social conflict across Latin America in the twentieth century. Especially since the Mexican Revolution of 1910-1920, rural movements organized to improve living standards and extend full citizenship rights to peasants and landless workers (Hershberg and Rosen 2006:1). In this narrative, imagery of Zapata, Guevara and guerilla insurgency reign supreme. Broadly speaking, however, the form and content of rural movements shifted markedly during the 1970s as functionalism and Marxism lost currency and new political practices emerged. The *new*

*social movements*, as theorists labeled them, eschewed “politics anchored in traditional actors who struggled for the control of the state, particularly the working class and the revolutionary vanguard” (Escobar and Alvarez 1992:1). Many of these new movements – although certainly not all – were influenced by variants of *liberation theology*, an interpretation of Christianity which contends the church must align itself with the poor and struggle for social justice

As a political-religious philosophy, liberation theology emanated from liberal-left poles in the Catholic church during the 1960s. Practitioners formed groups known as ecclesiastical base communities (CEBs by their Spanish initials) to encourage grassroots mobilization based on a broad vision of social change. CEBs soon became tied to powerful progressive social movements throughout Latin America. By the 1980s, over 100,000 CEBs existed in Brazil alone, with another 80,000 elsewhere in the hemisphere. Central to this organizing methodology was the use of dialogical techniques of education to develop internal community leadership and mobilize collective action (Robles 2008).

In Haiti, liberation theology provided a critical foundation for challenges to the Duvalier dictatorship. Church activists established new, “non-Duvalierist, grassroots peasant organizations” such as the Diocesan Institute for Adult Education (IDEA), which aimed to develop a “pool of trained peasant leaders known as 'animateurs'” (Asbed 1991:74). These *animators* (the term later adopted by the CIW) established peasant groups with the twin goals of cooperative economic development and “conscientization.” Church-based training centers and peasant groups proliferated across the island and

ultimately played a leading role in the democratic movement to unseat Duvalier. Several animators such as Jean Claude Jean fled to Immokalee in the aftermath of the coup against Aristide and played an important role in the formation of the CIW.

Drawing on a range of pre-migration social movement experiences Haiti, Mexico, and Guatemala, SFFP members identified three common tools to employ in their newly launched organizing process: popular education, leadership development, and protest actions. This approach still underlies the Coalition motto, “*conciencia + compromiso = cambio*” (consciousness + commitment = change). Dividing themselves into committees representing the three largest ethnic communities working in the fields (Mexicans, Guatemalans, and Haitians, respectively), they initiated a month-long community survey to identify the most pressing problems facing Immokalee's farmworkers. Low wages, violence in the workplace, lack of respect from bosses, and wage theft topped the list.<sup>59</sup>

In addition to laying longer-term organizing plans, the SFFP also took more immediate measures in its first year. In order to combat extensive price-gouging at local grocery stores, SFFP members pooled their money to purchase staple items and sell them on the street at a fair price. At the end of the season, participants received a dividend based on how much money they initially invested and how much time they spent selling items. When the CIW incorporated as a non-profit organization in 1996, the project evolved into a formal cooperative. This concept drew on traditions of *cooperativismo* prevalent in rural Latin American in the 1970s and 1980s (Centro de Estudios Cooperativos 1985). Notably, it succeeded in spurring local competition, significantly

driving down prices at Immokalee's grocery stores (Bowe 2007).

SFFP activists also confronted crewleader's for underpaying or refusing to pay workers; these *cobros* (wage reclamations) empowered workers as active participants driving the reclamation process instead of passive clients waiting for a phone call from legal services. With this model, SFFP recovered over \$100,000 in unpaid wages in 1994 alone. Despite these important achievements, the organization had larger aspirations: to overcome ethnic divisions and mobilize the farmworker community for systemic change. With an eye towards patient and careful base-building, the group set out to develop a program of popular education and establish a farmworker leadership training center (Payne 2000:92).

## Popular Education

Having committed to a process of conscientization in Immokalee, the small core of the SFFP engaged the tools at their disposal, namely the familiar methods of popular education used in CEBs throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. Brazilian educator Paulo Freire is credited with developing this approach in his work with illiterate peasants in northeast Brazil. Critical of the “banking theory of education,” which posits that teachers simply deposit information into the minds of students, Freire viewed education as a dialogical process where students themselves are actively involved in the production of knowledge (Kaufman 2003). In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, he writes:

Problem-posing education, as a humanist and liberating praxis, posits as fundamental that men [sic] subjected to domination must fight for their

emancipation. To that end, it enables teachers and students to become Subjects of the educational processes by overcoming authoritarianism and an alienating intellectualism; it also enables men [sic] to overcome their false perception of reality. (1988:74)

While the analysis that develops is guided by the questions the teachers ask, it is deeply rooted in the lived experiences of the students, and its effects are often transformative.

“Bit by bit,” Freire writes, “these groups begin to see themselves and their society from their own perspective; they become aware of their own potentialities. This is the point at which hopelessness is replaced by hope” (1989:13).

Using their contacts with the MPP, workers brought experienced *animateurs* from Haiti to conduct training sessions in Immokalee. Similarly, a theater group from Chiapas also visited. The SFFP used these techniques to encourage reflection on shared problems in the worker community and to facilitate participatory discussion arriving at solutions. “Why are we poor? Why are we divided amongst ourselves? Who benefits from this arrangement? How can we change this situation?” The budding animators creatively prodded one another and their fellow workers for answers to these questions. Describing the process in more detail, Asbed explains, “At its heart is the use of 'codes' – drawings, theater, song, video, stories, and so on – designed to capture a piece of community reality and to present that reality for reflection in a group” (2007:8). “It is *education for action*,” he adds, “and as such its effectiveness must ultimately be measured by the degree to which it moves the community to take action, fight for change, and win a degree of control over its collective destiny” (8). The focus on broad participation and valuable political insights drawn from everyday life made the approach an excellent fit for

Immokalee.

This method still guides the Coalition fifteen years later. Over the years, the movement has produced hundreds of codes that simply yet effectively identify the root causes of farmworker exploitation – namely, the structure and practices of the agricultural industry – and propose solutions through community-wide action. Popular education has proven effective at challenging worker alienation as well as divisions within Immokalee, creating a community identity and a shared space for reflection about present realities and future possibilities. As Gerardo Reyes explained to me one afternoon, “At the beginning, you unlearn what you know about the world and start seeing it from a different perspective. You start examining the system.” Leonel phrased it differently: “You learn that you don't have to stay quiet, that there is strength in unity.”<sup>60</sup>

At its best, popular education problematizes common-sense notions of identity, knowledge, and power. In the context of the early CIW, Brian Payne (2001) meticulously details how this counter-hegemonic process enables the individual and collective identity-formation necessary to spark and sustain social movement activity. This key perspective, however, is missing from other academic interpretations of the CIW's work. Jane Walsh (2005), for example, fails to account for these discursive practices and instead explains the success of the Coalition through the lens of positivist social movement theory. Yet as Jonathan Warren (2001) argues in his analysis of indigenous land rights struggles in Brazil, such theorists – including structural opportunists, rational choice proponents, and resource mobilization analysts – profoundly lack a concept of hegemony.<sup>61</sup> He





Illustration 1: Large mural inside the CIW office promoting immigrant worker unity. Photo credit: Meghan Cohorst.

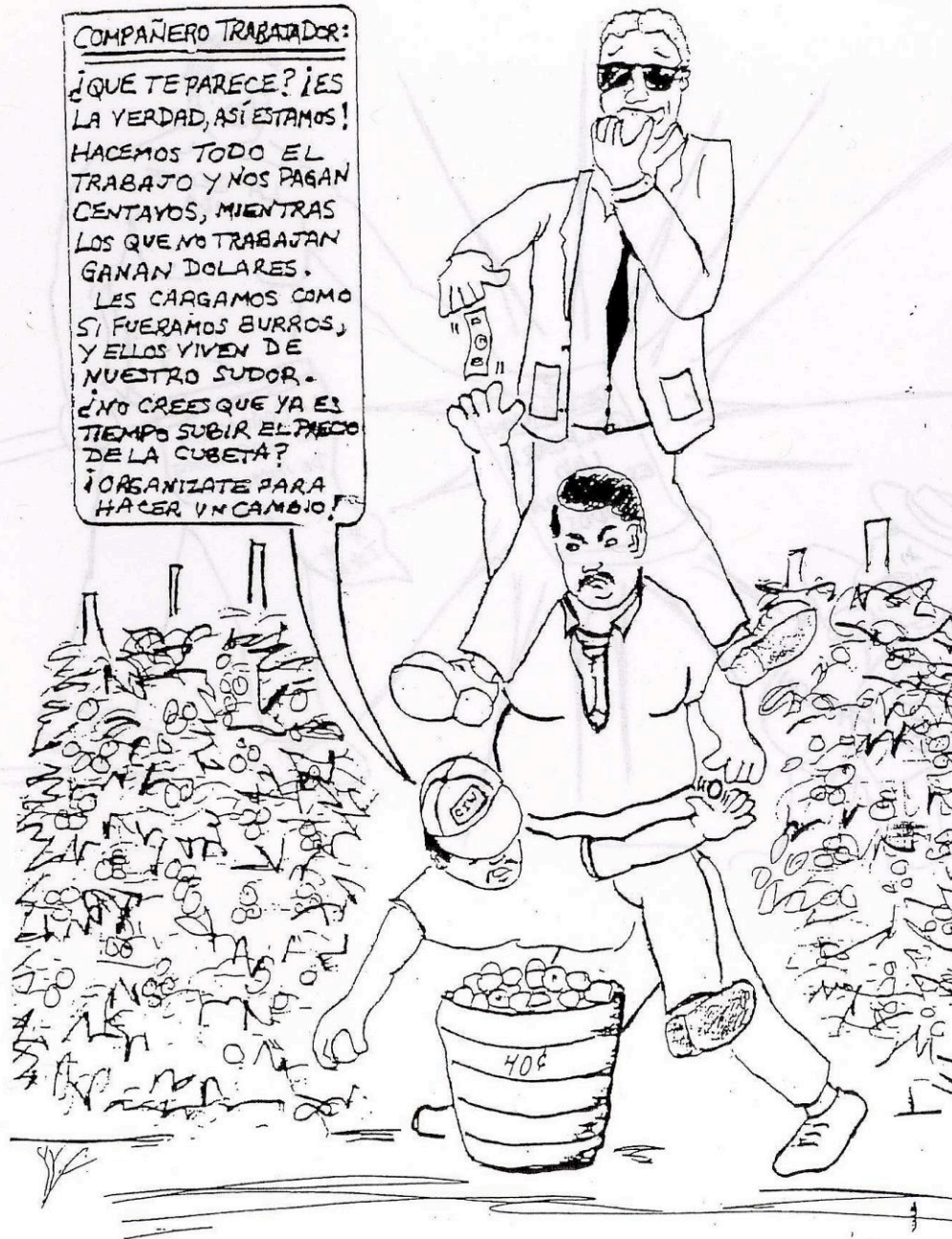


Illustration 2: Drawing depicting the relation between workers, crewleaders and growers.

challenges us to consider:

[They] erroneously presume that the “oppressed” have ready-made “hidden transcripts” – that is, there is an assumption that subalterns automatically have a critical understanding of their situation and possess the will to struggle. . . . They fail to realize that social inequalities are frequently sustained with the consent of the weak and not simply via repression. Moreover, identities appear in their model as preconstituted categories instead of as something to be invented and articulated. . . . None of this, of course, is meant to suggest that resources are an unnecessary component of protest mobilization, but only to concur with the new social movement theorists who note that collective identities and movement cultures cannot be taken for granted. (2001:154)

It is precisely because of hegemony that popular education techniques are so essential to the CIW's work in Immokalee. Its methods, which are grounded in workers' experiences, aim to undermine “the consent of the weak” and replace it with a “will to struggle.” The practice allows the worker community – one, generally speaking, with low literacy rates and little access to formal schooling – to radically recast its political subjectivities and, in turn, open new possibilities for the larger world it inhabits. Critical consciousness is very literally the seed for all that follows.

### We Are All Leaders

Given the never-ending turnover within Immokalee's farmworker community, the Coalition relies upon conscientization in order to animate and maintain an active, growing membership base. At this level, the interdependence between popular education and leadership development becomes self-evident. After the Taco Bell boycott victory, longtime ally and unionist Elly Leary explained, “The CIW is absolutely masterful at leadership development, creatively using popular education. Their bench is respectably

deep. These workers have a sense of identity as workers, understand the structure and nature of the fast-food industry and their place in it, and understand and can articulate a worldview” (2005:online). The heavy focus on leadership development is embodied in the Coalition's notion “*todos somos lideres*” (we are all leaders) and a corresponding set of practices and institutions that facilitate participation in the CIW's campaigns and daily affairs.

To begin, the open structure of the organization facilitates the entry of workers into the broad base of leadership where they find their voice as respected community leaders. This configuration is by design. In 1996, the SFFP formed its own board, legally incorporated as a non-profit 501(c)3 organization, and opened a storefront office on Second Street. Its new name – the Coalition of Immokalee Workers – underscored the formalized solidarity between the Mexican, Guatemalan, Haitian, and other worker communities in Immokalee. As part of the consolidation process, the CIW held a series of widely attended *asamblea general* (general assembly) meetings to establish its bylaws and codify its organizational principles and structure.

The membership decided that the board would be elected at an annual general assembly and comprised of longer-term Immokalee residents aligned with the Coalition's objectives and methods (many of whom had previously or still worked in the fields). The staff would also be elected by and accountable to the general assembly and comprised of workers who knew farm labor and they dynamics of Immokalee firsthand. The staff was horizontally structured (i.e., there is no “president” or “executive director”) and their pay

level commensurate with prevailing farmworker wages. In order to ensure they remain grounded in the realities of farm labor, the general assembly stipulated that staff spend a percentage of their time working in the fields each year. In fact, the CIW's watermelon harvesting cooperative grew out of this last requirement. These bylaws still govern the CIW and have given it considerable credibility both within and outside Immokalee. It is largely viewed as a legitimate representative of farmworkers' interests precisely because it is comprised of these very workers at every level.

The CIW functions as an intensive training ground for a wide array of organizing and technical skills. Norberto, a 53-year-old cacao farmer who served on staff for two years, told me before returning to Oaxaca, “I've learned so much about computers, public speaking, and running a radio station. I didn't attend school, so I didn't know these things before.” A number of staff members have amassed lengthy experiences with the CIW; demonstrating a high level of commitment, many have turned down lucrative job offers with unions or NGOs in order to see the work through in Immokalee. At any given point, the eight- or nine-person staff is made up of a handful of these longer-term veterans as well as more recent members. In terms of generative organizational dynamics, this is a tricky balance since longer-term staff members often have more intensive organizing backgrounds than their newer counterparts. To an impressive degree, however, the staff operates as a consensus-based collective that encourages the participation and input of newer members while also drawing on the veterans' years of accumulated knowledge.

Accordingly, the CIW has mostly avoided the pitfalls of the “charismatic leader”

model of social change. While the media often draws special attention to veteran leaders such as Lucas Benitez, the local and national face of the organization is actually quite diverse.<sup>62</sup> The difference is not of aesthetics and visualization but of group culture and organizing philosophy. As Gerardo Reyes explained to me, “All of us are just a piece of the puzzle; nobody is more or less important. Everybody who wants to be part of the picture is necessary to complete it.” The practice of group-centered leadership contrasts sharply with most farmworker and labor organizing in the U.S. Elly Leary makes the point:

The FLOC [Farm Labor Organizing Committee] like the UFW was built around the charisma and aura of their principal leaders—Baldemar Velasquez and the late Cesar Chavez. Generally, in FLOC and the UFW, strategy and tactics flow from top to bottom, even as rank and filers are promoted. The CIW, in contrast, can be described as an organization with group-centered leaders where strategies are fully developed at the base. The shortcomings of the FLOC and the UFW have a familiar ring—a number of labor activists have identified them as endemic to the trade union movement. (Leary 2005:online)

Addressing this question, Marc Rodrigues believes, “The CIW’s program of popular education and leadership development should allow it to steer clear of the danger of becoming associated with one or a few leaders and becoming detached from its base in Immokalee” (2006:11-12). Popular education and leadership development, in other words, function not just as specific methodologies but rather as a broader organizing ethos that attempts to repudiate vanguardism and provide a meaningful check against the centralization of authority.

Beyond serving on the staff, there are many ways to participate in the CIW. Most workers start by attending community-wide meetings that are held every Wednesday

evening during the harvest season. The meetings are facilitated by staff and involve some aspect of popular education (such as analyzing a movie scene, a drawing, or a skit), a discussion of relevant current events, or preparations for an upcoming protest. Outreach for the meetings is conducted by flyering door-to-door and in the streets as well as over the airwaves of *Radio Conciencia*; attendance normally varies between 50 and 100 workers. Oscar, a 22-year-old from Chimaltenango, Guatemala who is now on staff, described to me how his involvement began with these meetings:

I learned of the CIW through an uncle who was already in Immokalee. He was a CIW member and called me and invited me to a Wednesday night meeting. Leonel also invited me to a meeting, but I didn't go the first couple of times I was invited. Finally I went to a meeting and liked it a lot. We were sharing ideas and information and learning to be united in the struggle, learning that each person is very important and that our ideas can lead to social change. From the Wednesday meetings, I started going to the Burger King protests in Miami, participating in the radio station, buying from the co-op, and using the computers in the office. I also attended a *formación* [day-long workshop] and started inviting other people to the meetings.

Although Oscar participated in social justice organizing in Guatemala and was perhaps predisposed to become involved with the CIW, his experience demonstrates the crucial outreach role of the weekly meetings.

The community meetings also demonstrate the porous nature of membership in the Coalition. Many attendees are card-carrying members, meaning they have attended at least two meetings and paid fifteen dollars for an organizational photo identification card.<sup>63</sup> This may be their first season in Immokalee or perhaps they are returning to southwest Florida for a second, third or fourth time. Other attendees may not have Coalition ID cards yet still self-identify as members. In any case, it is safe to assume at

any moment during the season that the CIW represents several thousand low-wage workers. This claim has been evidenced several times throughout the group's history. In 2008, for example, four thousand workers signed a petition they later delivered to Burger King's headquarters. Invoking the role of consumer boycotts and petition campaigns in the abolition of the chattel slave trade, the CIW called on the fast-food giant to take steps to eliminate human rights abuses in its agricultural supply chain. Just two years earlier, facing public allegations by McDonald's that the CIW did not represent farmworkers in Immokalee, another four thousand workers signed cards authorizing the CIW to negotiate on their behalf with the fast-food industry in order to improve conditions in the fields. The cards were delivered to McDonald's headquarters outside Chicago, Illinois on a frozen, rainy day in April 2006 while one hundred workers and allies picketed outside.

Participation in the Coalition is a self-selecting process. Varying channels and levels of involvement are open for those motivated to pursue them. As workers develop increased confidence in their communication skills, for example, many begin to represent the CIW in public forums. Staff and members alike make frequent presentations about the realities of farm labor and current developments in the Campaign for Fair Food to schools, churches, and community organizations across the country. Eusebio, a member from Huehuetenango, Guatemala who now drives a tractor on a Florida citrus farm, recounts:

I started participating by attending weekly meetings and *formaciones*, and then I went on a couple of Truth Tours [to Yum headquarters in Louisville, Kentucky and McDonald's headquarters]. On these tours, I spoke in presentations with up to 300 students. I never imagined I would have that experience as an immigrant in



this country – giving presentations in large, famous universities to audiences that were shocked to hear our message.

Speaking from their lived experience in these settings is often transformative and reinforces the ongoing process of leadership development. Consumer conscientization, another byproduct of these presentations, has also been an essential component of the Campaign for Fair Food, as we will explore in Chapter 4.

### Gender and the CIW

The Immokalee farmworker community is, by some estimates, 80-90% male. As such, its workplaces, the CIW, and the community at large are always already masculine spaces. In future analyses, I hope to more rigorously explore the myriad intersections of transnational migration, gender, labor, and the culture and organizing strategies of the CIW. Suffice to say here that this environment poses a number of specific challenges for women workers, including those who wish to participate in the Coalition. Studying the organizational experiences of indigenous *Oaxaqueñas* in Baja California, Laura Velasco Ortiz suggests:

It is difficult to study women's participation in organizations without considering the ideology pertaining to appropriate spaces for women's action and the changes that migration can bring to that ideological order. . . . It is virtually impossible to talk about women's participation in migrant organizations without references to the gender division of labor in specific times and places, which harks back to the local construction of the contexts of subordination and resistance. (2004:103)

Indeed, as Ortiz documents, most migrant women not only work in the fields but also engage in forms of unpaid labor such as childcare, washing clothes, and preparing food

for their families. Even when time permits their involvement in local organizations, women often face resistance from spouses, fathers or brothers.

Nevertheless, a handful of exceptional women leaders have emerged within the CIW over the years, including Julia Gabriel and Francisca Cortez. In 2000, Gabriel received the National Organization of Women's (NOW) Courage Award for her efforts to end modern-day slavery in the fields. Describing women's two-pronged struggle for justice, she stated, "As women and as workers, we have to fight for our rights and against violence both in the fields and in our own homes." Toward this end, the CIW often uses available platforms, such as *Radio Conciencia*, to promote an anti-domestic violence agenda. The CIW has also taken steps to encourage greater female participation in the organization itself. In 2006, women staff members began organizing a *junta de mujeres* (women's meeting) each Sunday afternoon. Free childcare is available, and participants decide on collective projects. Currently the group provides English classes for migrant women in Immokalee. Being a woman both in Immokalee and in the CIW is still a daily struggle; however the organization's recent internal progress in this area is promising.

### La Tuya and the Community Center

As Eusebio and Oscar both mentioned, many CIW members choose to attend day- or weekend-long *formaciones* throughout the season to develop organizing strategies and tactics and/or to advance specific projects. The *comité central* (central committee) is one such group that meets regularly. The informal, thirty or forty-person committee is open

to all Coalition members and is responsible for planning community events such as the annual “Year of the Worker” party as well as developing the CIW's local and national organizing program. In many ways, the central committee is the organizational heart of the CIW. Another equally important group that uses the *formación* process oversees WCIW 107.9 FM *Radio Conciencia*.

Established in 2003 with assistance from the Prometheus Radio Project, the low-power radio station informally known as *La Tuya* (it's yours) has evolved into a principal site of community activity. Similar to the co-op, *La Tuya* finds resonance partly because the widespread use of community-based radio stations in Latin America, a trend tightly pegged to the rise of CEBs in the 1970s and 1980s (Pepino 1999). More practically, it is the perfect mode of communication in a town where the majority of residents have little access to the internet, television or newspapers. The station is run by a group of CIW members who serve as deejays, programmers, technicians, and promoters. Bumper stickers for the station adorn Immokalee's light posts and street signs, and its programs can be heard in the fields during the day and throughout labor camps at night. It is a savvy and non-dogmatic blend of music, call-in programs, know-your-rights information, and news broadcast in Spanish, Creole, and a few Mayan languages. Cruz, for instance, described his utter shock and happiness the first time he stumbled upon a marimba program broadcast in Kanjobal. He called to chat with the deejay, and so began his deep involvement with the CIW.

Beyond its immense and obvious ramifications for organizing, *La Tuya* provides

important services for the local community. In testimony to the Federal Communications Commission, Gerardo Reyes illustrates:

When Hurricane Wilma hit Immokalee in 2005, we realized the deep value of Radio Conciencia. All local radio stations were transmitting alerts on the impending hurricane, but Radio Conciencia was the only radio that was transmitting information on where to go and what to do in Spanish and in the indigenous languages spoken in our community. . . . Radio Conciencia received so many calls from people who were stranded in trailers that we knew the unmet needs of our community. We mobilized two vans and transported over 350 people to shelter until late into the night. After the storm we saw that several of the trailers in the camps from which we evacuated people had been completely destroyed.

After the storm Radio Conciencia continued to transmit information after the storm on where to find food and water and safety measures to take. By this time the County had realized the importance of Radio Conciencia to the community and had loaned us a generator so that we could continue to communicate these important messages in the aftermath of the storm. This is just one example of the many times Radio Conciencia has made a safer environment for our community.<sup>64</sup>

What started out in a small trailer a few blocks from the CIW's storefront now occupies prime real estate – with windows overlooking the parking lot where workers gather for their job search every morning – in the Coalition's new community center.

The center itself marks a tremendous accomplishment for the Coalition. The CIW website reports, “We have long had a dream of building our own community center to serve as a truly independent base for our human rights work in Immokalee. For years it remained a distant hope to be free of the control of Immokalee’s over-priced rental market and construct a center spacious enough to house our ever-growing program.”<sup>65</sup>

The center was made possible by contacts made through the Campaign for Fair Food. In 2004, several allies helped the Coalition make the down payment on a plot of land and

building in the heart of Immokalee; renovations and fundraising continued for four years amidst the frantic pace of the campaign. Finally, in the summer of 2008, the Coalition bid a bittersweet farewell to its mural-covered office on Second Street and moved into the new center.

The new center gives the Coalition the ability to considerably expand its local organizing work. To begin, the general meeting area is twice as large, nearly doubling the attendance capacity for Wednesday night meetings. The grocery co-op has grown significantly and carries a wider array of products. The multimedia center has also expanded; here members learn basic computer proficiency and may use the internet. The center's brightly painted walls are covered in posters and protest art from throughout the organization's fifteen year history. On Saturday nights, the CIW screens movies – no politics, just popular films – on the walls of the center to hundreds of workers. Just as exciting, the Coalition recently bought a marimba which is played by a group of members. Tom Philpott commented after his visit to Immokalee as part of the 2009 “Food Justice” delegation, "Honestly, the community center at times felt like liberated space in a war zone – a place dedicated to improving worker lives in a place seemingly designed to destroy them."<sup>66</sup>

### Why Should We Work for Lower Wages?

Building on the foundation of popular education and leadership development, community-wide protest actions comprise the final component of the CIW's organizing

model. These dramatic actions serve a dual purpose: first, to bring about change by pressuring the agricultural industry to improve harvesters' wages and working conditions; second, to provide an opportunity for reflection on the role of collective action in achieving such changes. The Coalition's first major protest – its coming out party after three years of quiet base-building and community education – began in the pre-dawn on November 13, 1995. Against the backdrop of twenty years of stagnant wages, Pacific Land Co., one of the largest employers in the area, announced its intention to lower tomato workers' hourly wage from \$4.25 to \$3.85 per hour. The proposed cut was the spark needed to widely mobilize the farmworker community.

Hundreds of farmworkers – including a sizable number of citrus pickers striking in solidarity – crowded the Pantry Shelf parking lot that morning to announce the *huelga general* (general strike). Strike leader Alicia Chavez posed the question of the hour, “Why should we work for lower wages?” The first strike in Immokalee since 1977 easily dwarfed its predecessors. The *Ft. Myers News-Press* estimated that as many as 3,000 workers participated at the height of the week-long work stoppage. An eighteen-year old Lucas Benitez explained to the press, “The difference is it's based in the community, not in the workplace. . . . The work since the beginning has been to raise public awareness and in education and in developing leadership in the community.”<sup>67</sup>

The Coalition's approach appeared to be working where previous models failed. Mexican, Guatemalan and Haitian workers occupied the parking lot day and night, turning away crewleaders' buses and bringing the harvest to a grinding halt. The strike

grew angrier; dumpsters were set ablaze as workers appropriated the site of their daily humiliation and transformed it into a space of vibrant resistance.<sup>68</sup> Matye, whose involvement with the Coalition began with the 1995 strike, recalls:

I supported the [1995, 1997 and 1999] strikes in the parking lot. At the time of the 1995 strike, I was working at a nursery in Alva. My friend Kadê invited me to an evening meeting to support strike. I went to the meeting, and I liked what they were saying – unifying the Mexican, Guatemalan, and Haitian communities. I came out to support the strike every morning from four to six and then I went to work at the nursery at seven. I'd get off work in the afternoon and come back out to the parking lot to protest some more.

The Haitian leadership of the strike, including Coalition spokesperson Jean Claude Jean, belonged to the same wave of immigrants as Matye, the so-called “Guantánamos.”<sup>69</sup>

Although many Haitians acquired work authorization as political refugees and soon left the fields, they played a key role in mobilizing support for the 1995 strike, and as we have seen, their contributions profoundly shaped the Coalition's overall methodology.

Taken aback by the size and fiery determination of the strike, Pacific announced it would increase workers' hourly wages to \$5.25. Although it affected only a segment of Immokalee's labor market, the grower's sudden about-face meant the first wage increase for tomato pickers in two decades. The energy from the victory fed the Coalition's accelerating local efforts. In 1996, the CIW organized the “March against Violence” described in Chapter 1. The following season, the Coalition formulated an overarching theme to depict the workers' struggle: the Campaign for Dignity, Dialogue, and a Living Wage. After gathering 2,000 signatures from workers asking for an increase in the picking piece rate, the CIW sent a letter to the ten largest Florida tomato growers

requesting a meeting. No grower responded to the Coalition's attempted dialogue.

As a result of the growers' deafening silence, the CIW launched its second-ever strike on December 1, 1997. More than 1,000 workers participated. As one striker made clear, “This is a battle for our rights. We live in terrible conditions. We are very poor and the cost of living is very expensive. . . . We are not roaches to be trampled upon.” By the fifth day of the strike, the Coalition and Gargiulo, Inc. agreed upon a twenty-five percent wage increase to fifty cents per bucket to take effect the following season. It was perhaps the first community-based collective bargaining agreement in U.S. history. While the agreement with southwest Florida's largest commercial grower represented an important step forward, the Coalition vowed to pressure the rest of the industry for its sixty-cent per bucket goal.<sup>70</sup>

### This is Just a Faster Death

On the heels of the Gargiulo agreement, the CIW immediately began preparations to intensify its struggle. On December 20, 1997, six members – Roberto Acevedo, Abundio Rios, Antonio Ramos, Domingo Jacinto, Pedro Lopez and Hector Vasquez – began fasting to dramatize the conflict and compel the growers to begin dialogue with the Coalition. Lopez described his participation in terms of a *cargo* (a responsibility to the community), a notion that has its roots in parts of Guatemala and Mexico. For his part, Acevedo explained, “We are already dying. We are paid nothing, can barely eat. This is just a faster death.” Rios asked, “Are the farmers willing to let us die rather than finally



listen to what we have to say?” The growers implicitly answered in the affirmative, and the hunger strike continued with widespread support throughout Immokalee. Members stopped by the office daily to boost the strikers’ spirits and show solidarity; as much as possible, the fast was experienced at a community level.<sup>71</sup>

On the nineteenth day of the fast, an emaciated Domingo Jacinto collapsed in the CIW office and was rushed to the hospital. In response, the Florida Fruit and Vegetable Association issued the statement: “We feel sorry for the fasting farm workers and hope they stop fasting soon before they further endanger their health.” Explaining their alleged inability to raise wages, the growers pointed to the higher costs of land and other inputs, as well as new competition from Mexican agribusiness spurred by NAFTA. The FFVA's Roy Gilmer stated, Florida tomato growers “are under pressures like they've never seen before.” Yet he then qualified, “Picking tomatoes has always been a job for people with no skills.” The comments contextualized the growers' resistance not only in economic but also in ideological terms. After all, the Coalition's demand for dialogue was quite radical in an industry that historically viewed its workforce as one more disposable input, not dissimilar from pesticides, wooden pallets, and tractors.<sup>72</sup>

After an excruciating thirty days, the hunger strike ended with the intervention of former President Jimmy Carter on January 18, 1998. Carter had offered to reach out to the growers if the workers agreed to end their death-defying fast. The three remaining hunger strikers did so at a Catholic mass in Naples led by Bishop John Nevins of the Diocese of Southwest Florida with over eight hundred people in attendance. Although

the growers maintained their stance of refusal, the hunger strike successfully ended the Coalition's relative isolation; the protest was mentioned in the *Washington Post*, *USA Today*, and the *New York Times*.<sup>73</sup> Likewise, the CIW had begun to slowly build contacts with allies – primarily students and people of faith – outside of Immokalee.<sup>74</sup> Finally, the hunger strike succeeded in focusing enough public attention on the issue that, while on the campaign trail, Governor Jeb Bush was able to broker a five-cent, industry-wide raise in the tomato picking piece rate.

Of course, Bush's move had more to do with election cycle opportunism than a genuine commitment to farmworkers' issues. When the CIW struck once more, this time in December 1999, with more than 700 workers' signatures in hand, they again reached out to Bush to request help. This time as governor, however, he remained quietly on the sidelines and ignored the workers' pleas. Several days later, on December 17, over fifty workers travelled from Immokalee to the state capitol in Tallahassee to attempt to meet with him; they were rebuffed by an aide instead. It was clear there would be no further action on the farmworkers' behalf from the governor's office. (Bush confirmed this suspicion in October 2000 when he refused to meet with Florida farmworkers, including CIW members, following a two-day fast outside the state capitol.) The strike of December 1999 thus ended without achieving any increase in wages, much less the sought-after seventy-five cents per bucket.<sup>75</sup>

## Stepping Outside Immokalee

After December 1999, the strike strategy was losing momentum as increasingly aggressive police tactics undermined its efficacy.<sup>76</sup> Aware of its limited ability to impact the growers' bottom line through work stoppages, as well as the difficulty in sustaining strikes without the war chest of a union at its disposal, the CIW began to look outside Immokalee for ways to pressure the growers into dialogue. On February 19, 2000, the CIW began an unpermitted, 15-day, 243-mile march from Ft. Myers to Orlando, walking from dawn to dusk and sleeping on church floors for just a few hours each night. The “March for Dignity, Dialogue, and a Fair Wage” – which featured a papier-mâché Statue of Liberty (currently housed in the Smithsonian) with a tomato bucket and emblazoned with Langston Hughes' line “I, too, am America” – culminated in a 300-person rally at the FFVA's headquarters on March 4. “I had never marched for so long; I never thought I would have to,” reflected Gerardo years later.<sup>77</sup>

Despite the outpouring of public sympathy for the marchers' aims, the growers remained as recalcitrant as ever. Ray Gilmer of the FFVA again rebuffed the workers' demand for dialogue. “We have no standing as a trade association to discuss wages and conditions between grower members and their employees.” He added, “To us, this is a transparent attempt to start a labor union for the farm workers down there.”<sup>78</sup> Members of the CIW returned to Immokalee both animated and furious. Yet as with the hunger strike a year earlier, the march had further put the Coalition into contact with the so-called “outside world.” Unbeknownst to the growers, the next phase of the struggle was

already taking embryonic shape. In just a few years, the CIW's analysis had grown from defining the industry in local to statewide terms – from the Pantry Shelf parking lot to the FFVA's headquarters in Orlando. Another analytical leap would soon transpire, catapulting the CIW squarely onto the national stage.

During this time, college student participants in the 15-day march began to discuss forming their own organization in alliance with the farmworkers' struggle.<sup>79</sup> This new statewide network – the Student/Farmworker Alliance – was consolidated a year later on the January 2001 “March for Farmworker Justice” from Quincy to Tallahassee. The two-day march, organized by a handful of Florida farmworker advocacy groups, ended at the governor's mansion where requests for redress were ignored once more. After six years of intense mobilization, the growers and their political allies still proved unwilling to acknowledge the dignity of farmworkers. The CIW had successfully halted the decline in wages, but reversing the trend was proving much more difficult. Having exhausted an array of pressure tactics – work stoppages, attention-grabbing protests, and probing political channels – the Coalition returned to Immokalee after the “March for Farmworker Justice” to count down the days before its course-altering announcement.

## Conclusion

Throughout twentieth century Florida, sustained farmworker organizing did not take root even amidst deepening poverty. Contesting conventional wisdom that dismissed farmworkers as “unorganizable,” recent immigrants to Immokalee from Haiti,

Mexico, and Guatemala launched an organizing process in the early 1990s to change the balance of power in the agricultural industry, overcoming ethnic divisions through a unifying vision of worker dignity. This new organization – the Coalition of Immokalee Workers – represented an amalgam of Latin American left political sensibilities as it selectively translated political technologies, such as popular education and leadership development, from their original geographies to a new terrain. While further research should discern the emergent and residual strains of organizing within this “reverse technology transfer,” it nonetheless has proven extremely effective at mobilizing agricultural and other low-wage workers for systemic, community-led change. As the Coalition built broad, diverse and democratic leadership, it also began to mount a frontal attack on the sub-poverty wages that have existed since the industry's inception. In the course of this struggle, however, it became increasingly clear that the ability to effectively bring about these changes lay at a higher level of the food industry. It is this dynamic evolution that we turn to next.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Setting Sights on the Fast Food Nation:

#### The Campaign for Fair Food:

The fast-food industry profits from farmworker poverty.

-- Coalition of Immokalee Workers

There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives. Malcolm knew this. Martin Luther King, Jr. knew this. Our struggles are particular, but we are not alone.

-- Audre Lorde

Many Florida farmworkers are our age: 18 to 25. Through a myriad of historic and social injustices, they have found themselves toiling in the fields of Florida and we are bombarded with the insidious advertising of an industry – of a system, really – that has no regard for human dignity. Obviously, our struggles are not the same, but they converge. Together with farmworkers, we are one step closer to building a world where we all fit, a world of freedom, dignity and justice. One multinational fast-food corporation at a time.

-- Marc Rodrigues, Student/Farmworker Alliance

On January 22, 2001, Martin Luther King Jr. Day, CIW members gathered outside a Taco Bell restaurant on U.S. Highway 41 in Ft. Myers and threatened a boycott of the Irvine, California-based fast-food chain. Apart from workers in Immokalee and a small circle of allies, few people – including Taco Bell's executives – took the threat seriously, if they even noticed at all. However, after two years of careful research and strategic planning, the Coalition was deadly serious. In 1999, the CIW had stumbled upon an article in *The Packer*, an agriculture industry journal, confirming a long-term contract

between fast-food giant Taco Bell and the Immokalee-based Six L's Packing Company.<sup>80</sup> It soon became clear that Six L's was one of Taco Bell's principal tomato suppliers, in addition to being among the largest Florida-based growers. Armed with this information, the CIW wrote to Taco Bell three times in 1999 and 2000 asking the restaurant chain to use its market influence over Six L's to encourage improvements in farmworkers' wages and working conditions. Taco Bell never even acknowledged receipt of the letters.

Building on years of intense mobilization in Immokalee, the CIW forged a set of local-global linkages that catapulted its struggle to campuses, community centers, places of worship, and fast-food headquarters across the United States. In this chapter, I analyze the development, strategies, and tactics of the Campaign for Fair Food, one of the most heralded struggles in recent labor history. In doing so, I also put forth an interpretation of the sophisticated ally network that coalesced during the Taco Bell boycott and continues to evolve today. I am especially interested in how globalization processes – both from above and from below – impacted the generative conditions, tenor, and trajectory of the campaign. This imprint is perhaps most visible among participants of the Student/Farmworker Alliance (SFA). Together the CIW and SFA have forged a set of coalitional practices that navigate theoretical complexity and, more importantly, continue to yield victories over global corporations in order to bring about a new day in Florida's fields.

### Reshaping the Food Industry from the Bottom Up

Throughout 2000, the CIW conducted a self-evaluation to assess its work and plan

for the future. The growers had proven utterly intransigent; the state's political class, hopelessly compromised. Out of bitter necessity, the Coalition began to rethink its approach. Their research turned up that Americans now spent more than \$110 billion on fast food, up from \$6 billion in 1970 (Schlosser 2002:3). The explosive growth of fast food had surreptitiously remade the agriculture industry around them and, in turn, opened up new strategic avenues. Whereas the CIW previously viewed the agriculture industry as a pyramid with three levels – farmworkers at the base, crewleaders as intermediaries, and grower-shippers at the apex – there was mounting evidence of a powerful layer above even the seemingly omnipotent growers.

Through collective analysis and research, the picture slowly came into greater focus. With their pooled purchasing power, consolidated retailers such as Yum Brands (owner of Taco Bell, Pizza Hut, KFC, Long John Silvers and A&W Restaurants), McDonald's, and other large buyers had been squeezing their tomato suppliers for deep price discounts. This trend created strong, downward pressure on wages for those at the bottom of the supply chain. It also meant, in the CIW's words, that Taco Bell and other fast-food giants bore “a significant degree of responsibility for the inhumane working conditions of the men and women who pick their tomatoes.”<sup>81</sup> This re-articulation yielded very real possibilities for social change. To wit, CIW members conversely reasoned that the fast-food chains could play an equally determinate role in improving conditions in Florida's fields, given sufficient motivation. This would require shifting protest from the point of production to the point of consumption, and a boycott provided



a concrete means of doing so.

In a study released during the Taco Bell boycott, Oxfam America confirmed these findings. It reports, “Whereas in 1990 grower-shippers received 41% of the retail price of tomatoes, by 2000 they were receiving barely one quarter (25%)” (2004:35). Value was being passed up the supply chain. Growers, however, unable to negotiate lower costs for equipment, fertilizers, and other inputs, sought to protect their falling profit margins by extracting additional value from their labor force. The study concludes, “Squeezed by the buyers of their produce, growers pass on the costs and risks imposed on them to those on the lowest rung of the supply chain: the farmworkers they employ” (2004:36).

The claim has been echoed from different corners of the food industry. On the eve of the CIW's 2007 march on Burger King's headquarters, fast-food critic and author Eric Schlosser argued in a *New York Times* op-ed:

Florida's tomato growers have long faced pressure to reduce operating costs; one way to do that is to keep migrant wages as low as possible. Although some of the pressure has come from increased competition with Mexican growers, most of it has been forcefully applied by the largest purchaser of Florida tomatoes: American fast food chains that want millions of pounds of cheap tomatoes as a garnish for their hamburgers, tacos and salads.<sup>82</sup>

Even loyal industry insiders admit the deleterious effects of the cost-price squeeze on farmworkers' wages: “Forcing down the cost of tomatoes, a minor component on the fast-food menu, does little to make the restaurant more profitable. It will go a long way toward harming a loyal group of suppliers and growers and their workers,” admonished Charles Porter, owner of a Homestead-based tomato repacking operation.<sup>83</sup>

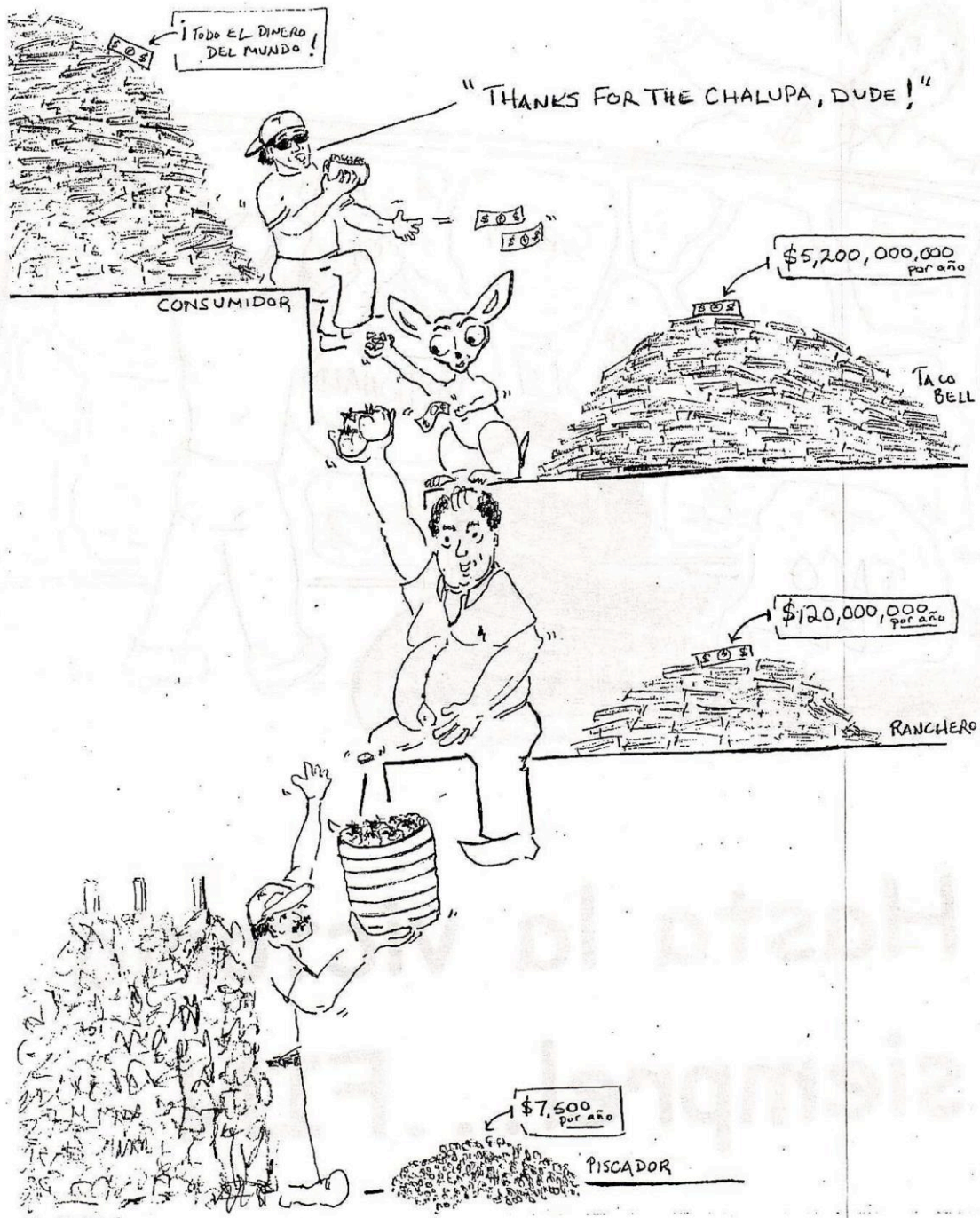


Illustration 3: Drawing depicting the role of the fast-food industry in farmworker poverty.

Moreover, focusing on the corporate retailers who purchase Florida tomatoes offered a strategy for cutting through the relational murkiness of the agricultural industry. This system of layers contains “a long chain of middlemen: the contractor, the grower, a processor, a buyers' cooperative or purchasing entity of some sort, another processor, a corporation, and a retail outlet for the finished product. Each entity is protected by a legal and corporate firewall” (Bowe 2007:34). The premise of the Taco Bell boycott was to pierce these firewalls – stepping over the growers in order to reverse the cost-price squeeze – by connecting farmworkers poverty to the luminous logos of multinational fast-food corporations. Pressuring a giant such as Taco Bell would require turning its biggest asset – its brand – into a liability.

Unlike Florida tomato growers, fast-food companies depend on positive public opinions concerning their ubiquitous brand images. According to Taco Bell's estimates, it sold nearly 32 million tacos a week to 55 million customers at 4,600 locations while its advertisements reached 125 million people per week in 2001. Monica Reedy, co-founder of the Student/Farmworker Alliance (SFA), explained, “Nobody can recognize the names of these growers. . . . They have no public image. But Taco Bell does and uses that image to its advantage to attract customers. It should be held accountable to that image.”<sup>84</sup> In his bestseller *Fast-Food Nation*, Eric Schlosser paralleled this new line of attack in relation to the meatpacking industry: “The right pressure applied to the fast-food industry in the right way could produce change faster than any act of Congress. . . . The same tactics employed by the anti-sweatshop groups can be used to help workers much closer

to home – workers in the slaughterhouses and processing plants of the High Plains” (2002:267-68). He concludes, “The usefulness of the market, its effectiveness as a tool, cuts both ways. The real power of the American consumer has not yet been unleashed. . . . A good boycott, a refusal to buy, can speak much louder than words” (2002:269).

### Workers and Allies, Shoulder to Shoulder

On April 1, 2001, three hundred people – farmworkers and their student, labor, and faith allies – gathered in front of a Taco Bell restaurant in Orlando to declare war on the fast-food industry. In the spirit of April Fool's Day, the CIW presented Taco Bell with a satirical “Golden Bucket Award” for its heartfelt dedication to improving the wages and conditions of Florida farmworkers. The underlying gravity of the moment, however, was not lost on any of the participants. CIW member Romeo Ramirez later explained:

Taco Bell is a multinational corporation that makes billions and billions of dollars on the backs of farmworkers and indigenous people, because they can get away with buying cheap ingredients and paying below-poverty wages. When you look at the difference in power between us as farmworkers and Taco Bell as a billion-dollar corporation, you may think we are crazy for taking them on. They have all the wealth and political power, and we have only one weapon. But that weapon – the truth – is the most powerful thing on Earth, so we are certain that we will prevail. Many students, religious and labor leaders, and people from our community are joining us to call for a boycott to end “sweatshops in the fields” (2001:183).

The CIW placed three clear demands on Taco Bell. First, the CIW demanded that Taco Bell pay an additional penny-per-pound for the tomatoes it purchases and ensure that the penny is passed down the supply chain to raise the harvesting piece rate.<sup>85</sup> Second, the

CIW demanded a role in creating, implementing, and monitoring Taco Bell's supplier code of conduct to ensure the human rights of tomato workers in its supply chain. Last, the CIW demanded that Taco Bell use its influence over its suppliers to convene a three-part dialogue between the fast-food industry, Florida grower-shippers, and the CIW to systemically address the abysmal conditions in the fields.

In order for the boycott to stand a remote chance of success, the CIW knew it was imperative to overcome its geographic and social marginalization – its “invisibility” – by building strong alliances with consumers outside of Immokalee. In the weekends leading up to the campaign launch, a busload of CIW and SFA members toured Sarasota, Miami, Gainesville, and Tallahassee to speak at schools and churches. From the beginning, education was fused with action as workers and allies concluded presentations by picketing at nearby Taco Bell restaurants. These visits later became the model for cross-country “Taco Bell Truth Tours,” where busloads of workers left Immokalee on multi-city tours culminating in large, creative protests at Taco Bell and Yum headquarters. The Truth Tours – including a three thousand person protest in 2002; a sixty-person, ten-day hunger strike in 2003; and a three-day, forty-mile march from East Los Angeles to Irvine in 2004 – generated consumer awareness and media coverage, strengthened local and national ally networks, reinforced worker resolve, and applied direct public pressure on the campaign target, Taco Bell.<sup>86</sup>

From the fields of Florida to the streets of California, the visible leadership of CIW farmworkers was foundational to the boycott's success. Contrasting the Taco Bell

campaign to prevalent boycott models which seldom involve worker participation and control, scholar and organizer Jennifer Gordon writes:

More than eight hundred farmworkers deliberated the decision to involve Taco Bell, fearing that a focus on consumers would diminish the involvement of the group's broad worker leadership. "You go to a boycott protest," says Lucas Benitez. . . "and you see church people, students – but rarely workers. We wanted to make sure that didn't happen with us." The coalition has succeeded in that goal. As with the work stoppages and hunger strikes that its members have led in the past, workers have been deeply involved in all stages of the boycott as it has developed. (2001:27)

After the boycott victory, Gerardo Reyes underscored this point, "The idea to take on the fast-food world came from workers. The idea to do a boycott and to focus on Taco Bell came from workers. . . . Workers drive the direction of the campaign. And of course, workers are telling our stories and speaking from our own experiences" (Solnit 2005:41).

Correspondingly, allies were not asked to speak *for* workers. Rather they were invited to create "autonomous united fronts" by identifying their own stakes in the struggle and joining with farmworkers to fight for a better world (Leary 2005:online).

Asbed further elaborates this point:

The CIW's political analysis reinforced this relationship, as workers cast the campaign as a genuine alliance bringing together different sectors around their common interests in a more just, more transparent, food industry. Students, who as consumers were themselves exploited by fast-food advertising that sorely underestimated their capacity for critical analysis, and people of faith, whose understanding of faith challenged them to question their participation as consumers in an industry so dependent on exploitation, found the space to play active roles in a campaign that looked to them not as passive "supporters" but as true allies fighting with their own resources and for their own interests, alongside workers from Immokalee in a horizontal relationship. The respect inherent in that relationship of alliance, and reinforced by the shoulder-to-shoulder presence of workers and allies in major campaign actions, was crucial to the boycott's success. (2007:21)

In our interview last fall, Brian Payne, SFA co-founder and its first full-time staff person, similarly recalled:

Some of the most powerful moments I remember on the march [from Ft. Myers to Orlando] were the presentations in churches along the way. Inevitably there would be some church supporter at a presentation who would tear up, talk about how terrible they felt that all of this was happening, and ask what they could do to help the workers – couldn't they donate some clothes or something to help the poor workers? On two specific occasions I remember Lucas [Benitez] answering that the workers were not marching or leading these presentations for anyone to feel sorry for them, and in fact they did not want charity – they were asking for an alliance with students and church members, to take on a backwards industry that was hurting not only farmworkers, but also consumers.

Both the leadership of the workers and the ensuing distinction between engaged “ally” and charitable “supporter” were key factors enabling the CIW to amass a large ally base over the four years of the Taco Bell boycott. As Charlene, a young woman from Long Island who became deeply involved with SFA's national leadership at age sixteen, told me, “I had never heard about a movement that was started by workers themselves. The leadership of the workers has been the key to differentiating the CIW from other workers' movements.”

It is well-known in U.S. organizing circles that the CIW ally network is as diverse as it is large, spanning “anarchists to archbishops.” Kristi Laughlin (2007) provided a rich treatment of the role of faith allies in the Taco Bell boycott victory. Some highlights include the boycott's endorsement by the fifty million-member National Council of Churches as well as the early, unwavering commitment of the Presbyterian Church USA. Likewise, the student-led “Boot the Bell” campaign spread across campuses nationwide.

Grassroots worker and community organizations participated in major actions. At the same time, faith and human rights allies coordinated resolutions calling for supply chain social responsibility that garnered 43% and 35% support at Yum's shareholder meetings in 2003 and 2004, respectively. Additionally, a number of public figures have made high-profile visits to Immokalee including the Honorable Mary Robinson, Ethel Kennedy, John Sweeney, and Senator Bernie Sanders. President Carter has also maintained his involvement, sending public letters of support at critical moments throughout the campaign.

On March 8, 2006, the one-year anniversary of the Taco Bell boycott victory, the CIW and its allies consolidated these relationships into the Alliance for Fair Food (AFF), a network of human rights, religious, student, labor, sustainable food and agriculture, environmental and grassroots organizations. In its own words, “The AFF promotes principles and practices of socially responsible purchasing in the corporate food industry that advance and ensure the human rights of farmworkers at the bottom of corporate supply chains.”<sup>87</sup> Some of the nearly two hundred participating organizations include the AFL-CIO, Amnesty International, Jobs with Justice, the Episcopal Church USA, United Students Against Sweatshops, Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano/a de Atzlán (MEChA), the National Family Farm Coalition, and Miami Workers Center. Since its inception, the AFF has played an important role in the ensuing campaigns against McDonald's, Burger King, and Subway.



## From Chiapas to Immokalee: Postmodern Social Conflict

The CIW and its allies strive for a balance of decentralization and coordination. Communications technologies such as the internet – the very tools that facilitate rapid, global movements of capital – play a crucial role mediating the flow of information necessary for this relationship. These forms of networked organization are increasingly characteristic of contemporary social movements and transnational advocacy networks (Notes From Nowhere 2003; Keck and Sikkink 1998). These trends have even captured the attention of military analysts John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt. In *Networks and Netwars*, their study on transnational terrorists, criminals, and “radical activists” (such as the Zapatistas in Mexico and protesters that shut down the 1999 WTO meetings in Seattle), they write:

The information revolution is altering the nature of conflict across the spectrum. We call attention to two developments in particular. First, this revolution is favoring and strengthening network forms of organization. . . . Second, as the information revolution deepens, the conduct and outcome of conflicts increasingly depend on information and communications. More than ever before, conflicts revolve around “knowledge” and the use of “soft power.” (2001:1-2)

Arquilla and Ronfeldt conclude that information and perception management is now a crucial site of struggle between social forces. Indeed, this shift has spawned a cottage industry of public relations consultants and step-by-step guides for those seeking to neutralize communication-savvy activists, such as the firm McDonald's hired in 2005 in response to the Campaign for Fair Food.<sup>88</sup>

The shift in the nature of conflict that Arquilla and Ronfeldt outline is connected to parallel globalization processes, including accelerating technological development and

the intensification of poverty and social exclusion. Scholar Boaventura de Sousa Santos elaborates:

The other side of this [neoliberal political and cultural] hegemony, however, was the hegemonic practices that have intensified exclusion, oppression, destruction of the means of subsistence and discrimination of large numbers of people, leading them to situations where inaction or conformism would mean death. . . . The acts of resistance into which these situations were translated, together with the revolution in information and communication technologies that took place simultaneously, permitted the making of alliances in distant places of the world and the articulation of struggles through local/global linkages. Thus an alternative globalization was gradually constructed – alternative to neo-liberal globalization, a counter-hegemonic globalization, a globalization from below. (2006:6)

Many activists and academics agree that the Zapatista uprising on January 1, 1994 – the day NAFTA went into effect – marks a key point in the timeline of globalization from below (Katzenberger 1995; Khasnabish 2007). Social scientist Kara Zugman writes:

In 1994, the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) ushered in a new era of social change and revolution in the wake of the end of the Cold War. Two years after the break-up of the Soviet Union. . . a small but well organized largely Mexican indigenous guerilla declared war on the Mexican Army calling the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) a “death sentence for indigenous people.”

. . . The Zapatistas were not just the last stand of the dying Latin American revolutionary movements. There was something very unique about their style and politics. . . . Soon after, scholars labeled the EZLN as the first “postmodern” revolutionary movement. In a break with revolutionary movements of the recent past, the EZLN demonstrated a will to choose dialogue over war, a will to listen, and a will to change direction when the path they had taken failed to achieve their goals. Perhaps even most significantly, the EZLN refused to take state power through elections or force thus inaugurating a new era of social change for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. (2008:347-48)

Indeed, the symbolic impacts of the EZLN uprising have reverberated globally.

Noam Chomsky recalls the Zapatistas appearing suddenly, “like a meteor flashing across

a dark sky, instantly capturing the imagination of the world" (2001:13). Zugman further argues, "The EZLN was one of the main inspirations of the global justice movement inspiring diverse movements such as the Direct Action Network (DAN) [organizer of the blockade that shut down the 1999 World Trade Organization meetings in Seattle], People's Global Action, and the Indymedia movements." She continues, "These organizations borrowed from the style and methods of the EZLN; for example, EZLN's network-like structure and the supporters in Mexico, use of the Internet, and some tenets of their ideologies and political vision" (2008:356-57). The new communication modes and forms of organization have created what economist Harry Cleaver (1998) terms an "electronic fabric of struggle," coalescing into a movement of movements to confront neoliberal globalization and offer radically democratic alternatives.

Taking a cue from the discursive and political strategies of the Zapatistas (and, for that matter, the new social movements of the 1980s that prefigured the EZLN uprising), the global justice movement does not privilege a universal revolutionary subject, such as the industrial proletariat in orthodox Marxism. Instead, according to Santos, it puts forth an insurgent cosmopolitan politics:

Neo-liberal globalization has shown that exploitation is linked with many other forms of oppression that affect women, ethnic minorities (sometimes majorities), indigenous peoples, peasants, the unemployed, workers in the informal sector, legal and illegal immigrants, ghetto subclasses, gays and lesbians, children and the young. All these forms of power create exclusion. One cannot ascribe to any one of them, in the abstract, nor to the practices that resist them, any priority as to the claim that "another world is possible." Political priorities are always situated and context dependent. (2006:37)

"One 'no' and many 'yeses'" became a powerful rallying cry as the networked movements

congealed across the Global South and North throughout the 1990s. They finally burst into mainstream consciousness with a series of large demonstrations against meetings of the architects of neoliberal globalization: the 1999 WTO meeting in Seattle; the 2000 and 2001 meetings of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund in Washington D.C.; and the G8 Summit in Genoa, Italy in 2001, which attracted more than 300,000 protesters by some accounts. In 2001, the World Social Forum met for the first time in Porto Alegre, Brazil. The transnational exchange among social movements and NGOs – along with its thematic, regional, national, and local corollaries – “may be said to represent today, in organizational terms, the most consistent manifestation of counter-hegemonic globalization” (Santos 2006:6).

Taken together, these developments profoundly shaped the field of play the CIW entered when it launched the Campaign for Fair Food in 2001. Much of the CIW's recent successes can be attributed to its skillful navigation of the “electronic fabric of struggle.” Most obviously, its use of the internet and ally network structures bear resemblance to EZLN-inspired forms. In this new terrain, Arquilla and Ronfeldt argue, narratives play an essential role in mobilizing geographically and ideologically disparate allies. “Among civil-society netwarriors, the narrative level of analysis may matter most. Sharing and projecting a common story about their involvement in an activist network enliven and empower these groups and attract their audiences” (2001:xi). Towards this end, the CIW website is full of powerful images – similar to the popular education codes the CIW uses in its local organizing as well as national actions – that tell a compelling story and spur

critical analysis. By publishing its reflections on the website, the CIW makes its thinking directly available to those outside Immokalee, including allies, journalists, and even corporate executives. Although the content is controlled by the CIW – as opposed to the “open publishing” of online clearinghouses such as the Independent Media Centers – it is part and parcel of the digital media trends that have enabled global justice activists “to coordinate actions, build networks, practice media activism, and physically manifest their emerging political ideals” (Juris 2005:192).

Accordingly, the Coalition flexibly frames the campaign, both online and offline, in order to attract a spectrum of allies. Gihan Perera of the Miami Workers Center notes:

CIW uses a human rights perspective to nationally engage students and faith-based groups, and it seems to be working. They are winning and mobilizing a large movement in support of rural workers. . . . In the dearth of progressive mass movements and in the context of a fractured political left, the human rights frame provides possibilities of putting forward bold alternatives while appealing broadly to a common interest in the future of humanity.<sup>89</sup> (2007:online)

Alternately, the CIW frames the campaign as an effort to curb unchecked corporate power, to end “sweatshops in the fields” and “food-borne injustice,” and to promote “fair food.” Each frame allows the CIW access and resonance with particular audiences – labor and anti-sweatshop activists, sustainable food advocates, people of faith, and so on. SFA staff member Meghan Cohorst summarized this rhetorical plasticity succinctly, “There is no single demographic of CIW allies; everyone can find a way to relate to this campaign.” In our interview last fall, Natasha, a *son jarocho* musician and longtime, California-based SFA organizer described the campaign in this way:

It's like the protests in Seattle, people en masse converging for myriad

interconnected reasons to define and redesign trade and invert business as usual. If you unravel the Campaign for Fair Food in any direction you find the ally movement to the CIW hits so many pillars: universal dignity for the work we do, reining in corporate power run-amok, sticking it to the global brands, bringing immigrants out of the shadows, redefining our connection to food and producers. That's where I find my motivation. I find the analysis so holistic.

These statements are further evidenced by the diverse range of organizations belonging to the Alliance for Fair Food, itself a smaller-scale “movement of movements.”

In addition to shaping organizational forms and communication modes, the rise of counter-hegemonic globalization – particularly the anti-sweatshop movement and street protests in the Global North starting with Seattle in November 1999 – created a political opening for the farmworkers' struggle, one astutely recognized during the CIW's internal reflections throughout 2000. When the Collier County Sheriffs responded to the December 1999 work stoppage with a massive police presence, citing fears of a Seattle-inspired street battle in the Pantry Shelf parking lot, they were, humorously enough, onto something. A sub-generation of young activists were radicalized between the Zapatista uprising and the protests targeting the WTO, World Bank, and IMF (Khasnabish 2008). A newly inspired and creative political imagination, along with the rise of anti-corporate – including anti-sweatshop – organizing, set the stage and built the networks enabling the rapid expansion of the Student/Farmworker Alliance.<sup>90</sup>

Finally, the CIW effectively seized the opportunity to make local-global linkages, thereby broadening its audience and situating itself within worldwide struggles for social justice. In public presentations and local popular education, CIW members began to connect their exploitation as farmworkers to economic displacement caused by NAFTA.

The CIW began attending the annual vigil to shut down the “School of the Americas” hemispheric military training center in Ft. Benning, Georgia, both to promote the boycott among likely allies and to support the vigil's aims. In 2003, the CIW joined activists in the streets at the spring meeting of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. The “March of Shame,” organized by the Latin American Solidarity Coalition, passed by a Taco Bell restaurant where more than 3,000 people protested.<sup>91</sup>

Likewise, the Coalition attended the World Social Forum in 2002, 2003, 2005 and 2006; in these forums, the CIW began to make connections and share analysis with many of the rural social movements comprising the Via Campesina network, particularly the Brazilian *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* (Landless Workers Movement or MST). In fact, MST representatives were on hand in Louisville in 2005 for the Taco Bell boycott victory celebration and the “Our World, Our Rights: Conference on Global Justice,” which brought together several hundred students, people of faith, and members of community-based organizations.<sup>92</sup> Most recently, the CIW participated in the U.S. Social Forum in Atlanta, Georgia in July 2007.

More significantly, the CIW played a pivotal role in establishing the Root Cause coalition with south Florida organizations Power U and Miami Workers Center. In November 2003, Root Cause organized a three-day, 34-mile march from Ft. Lauderdale to Miami to protest the Free Trade Area of the Americas ministerial meeting. Promoting a vision of “global justice from the grassroots,” they declared:

As poor people and people of color in South Florida who suffer the most direct impacts of corporate globalization, we have united as Root Cause to express our

belief that everyone, no matter their ethnicity, place of birth, gender or sexual identity, has the right to healthcare, a living wage, fair working conditions, decent housing, equal access to education, a clean living and working environment and a voice in the decisions that impact our lives. Although each of us suffers different forms of oppression and exploitation, we are all united by the vicious framework of corporate globalization.<sup>93</sup>

While local, state and federal law enforcement agencies transformed Miami into a model homeland security state, the politically nuanced and logistically sound Root Cause march became the highlight of the otherwise bleak anti-FTAA mobilization in Miami.

Analyzing the Root Cause march, activists Manuel Pastor and Tony LoPresti conclude, “Seattle may have been the beginning [of the protest movement in the Global North], but Miami is likely to be remembered as turning point in the struggle to forge the global-local link” (2004:online).

Before proceeding to the final section of this chapter, however, it is necessary to provide a clarification about the conceptual relationship between the CIW and the EZLN. A number of commentators (Leary 2005; Zugman 2008) have plainly misinterpreted the influence of the Zapatista movement on the CIW. This is unsurprising since the EZLN looms large in the political imaginations of many U.S. leftists and has also personally inspired some CIW members, thereby influencing their public discourse.<sup>94</sup> Furthermore, like the Zapatistas, the CIW has engaged the global justice movement and echoed the cry, “another world is possible.” Underscoring more concrete similarities, Zugman writes:

The CIW, like the Zapatistas, used the Internet to connect with a multitude of communities. . . . A central principle of the boomerang strategy [using Taco Bell's brand image against itself] was that allies are *autonomous* (the CIW's word, reflecting their Zapatista heritage) in their actions, but committed to following the lead of the workers from Immokalee. Although the coalition provided basic



information and communication tools like flyers, postcards, stickers, sample letters, and resolutions, each group in the alliance was expected to run its own campaign – developing its own strategy and tactics. They were not expected to obtain permission from the CIW for their actions. . . . It reflects a political strategy based on the linking up of various autonomous groups and movements instead of trying to united a single movement under a single hierarchy. (2008:359)

Zugman's analysis of the CIW's use of communication tools and the relation between the workers and their allies is essentially correct. However, she then extrapolates that *zapatismo* “is a political vision and practice that offers immigrants in the United States a subject position to organize for their rights without having to wait for a political party or a union to protect them” (2008:360). She cites as further evidence, “The Coalition of Immokalee Workers proclaims another Zapatista idea 'we are all leaders'” (2008:353).

Although a research error possibly skewed her case study,<sup>95</sup> Zugman incorrectly calculates the degree to which the long shadow of the EZLN has shaped the Coalition's worldview. This betrays a lack of knowledge of the CIW's unique formative history and its methodological roots stemming primarily from the CEB-influenced Haitian peasant movements of the 1980s. To further insist that *zapatismo* provides the CIW a subject position from which to organize overlooks the Coalition's own theoretical contributions in that area, namely building a movement for farmworker dignity in the belly of the U.S. South. Furthermore, Zugman collapses the goals of the two movements, overlooking that the CIW is primarily concerned with worker dignity and power, albeit framed in community-wide terms, while the Zapatistas struggle is, in her own words, an effort “to reconfigure power relations by de-legitimizing the government and those who control it” (2008:352). Finally, there is a tendency to ascribe Zapatista origins to any overlap

between the movements' philosophies, such as the belief that “we are all leaders.” This is curious since the CIW's organizing in Immokalee predated the 1994 uprising in Chiapas.

### Brand-Busting in Post-9/11 America

On September 11, 2001, two days before the CIW was set to leave on the first Taco Bell Truth Tour, a pair of hijacked airliners smashed into the World Trade Center. The same day, the *Financial Times* published a front-page story on the impending protests at the fall meeting of the World Bank and IMF in Washington, D.C.; the mass action was expected to attract over 100,000 participants.<sup>96</sup> The nation's political climate hardened overnight following the terrorist attacks, and, sensing the shift, the Coalition postponed its tour. The protest wing of the global justice movement – along with any expression of dissent in general – was largely silenced under a deluge of nationalism and a so-called “war on terror” that rained bombs on Afghan, and later Iraqi, civilians. As journalist and cultural critic Naomi Klein noted in an October 2001 article in *The Nation*, “Politicians and pundits around the world instantly began spinning the terrorist attacks as part of a continuum of anti-American and anti-corporate violence: first the Starbucks window, then, presumably, the WTC” (16). *The Nation's* editors concluded, “Post-September 11, even peaceful protests directed at powerful symbols of capitalism find themselves in an utterly transformed semiotic landscape.”

However, abandoning its critique of concentrated economic power was not an option for the CIW, who had just hitched its wagon to an aggressive corporate

accountability campaign. And despite the political climate's dramatic shift to the right, neoliberal globalization – now veiled as a permanent state of exception – still weighed heavily on the consciousness of many young activists (although constraining renewed U.S. military violence and anti-immigrant scapegoating also assumed priority). In this void, the Taco Bell boycott carefully gained traction, emanating hope from the grassroots in a bleak time and becoming a “new face of the global justice movement,” as activist-puppeteer David Solnit (2005) labeled it.

The Student/Farmworker Alliance was a critical propellant of the campaign. At the time of the boycott launch in April 2001, SFA had contacts at every major university in Florida as well as the University of Notre Dame.<sup>97</sup> The nascent network organized an impressive “May Day of Action” on May 1, 2001 in twelve cities affecting close to thirty Taco Bells. This model of tightly coordinated yet geographically diffuse protest – a tactic borrowed directly from the global justice movement – became a staple weapon in the SFA arsenal over the following years.<sup>98</sup> In October 2001, a ten-person CIW and SFA delegation embarked on a “mini-tour” following the proposed path of the canceled tour. Taking their show on the road, the tour visited Atlanta; South Bend, Indiana; Chicago; Madison; Denver; Salt Lake City; San Francisco, Los Angeles and Irvine; Albuquerque; and Oklahoma City in just ten days. By the end of 2001, boycott committees existed in over fifty U.S. communities.

Meanwhile, with scarce resources but abundant resolve, SFA continued to expand its national base. As Taco Bell's presumptive 18-to-24-year-old target demographic, SFA

activists began to take sharper aim at the fast-food giant's advertising practices. In doing so, they aligned themselves with a youth-led wave of brand-based activism. In her book *No Logo*, Naomi Klein chronicles how the 1990s were a revolutionary period for brand-name marketers as a “youth-culture feeding frenzy” turned young people's disparate identities and styles into corporate “brand food” at unprecedented rate (2000:81). Fast-food giants such Taco Bell were as keen to these marketing trends as MTV or Nike, and the industry's multi-billion dollar advertising campaigns adapted to the shifting terrain with unflattering results for young people. In 1999, Taco Bell's marketing consultants found, “It now takes much more to satisfy the self-indulgent demands of 18 to 24-year-olds than it did five years.”<sup>99</sup> They continued, “Today's young adults are exposed to a bombardment of the senses that is much more intense and much greater than even their parents' generation. They have become addicted to constant stimulation and actually feel 'bored' unless their insatiable demand for novelty is being satisfied.” The labeled their prized young consumers, “the new hedonism generation.”

Taco Bell and other youth-obsessed corporations, however, failed to understand the implicit boomerang risks of this marketing strategy. Klein writes, “The sheer voracity of the corporate cool hunt did much to provoke the rise of brand-based activism: through adbusting, computer hacking, and spontaneous illegal street parties, young people all over the world are aggressively reclaiming space from the corporate world, 'unbranding' it, guerilla-style” (2000:81). Young people, particularly in the branded, privatized environs of the Global North, increasingly resisted new forms of corporate hegemony in irreverent

and effective ways. Inspired by worldwide struggles against social exclusion, displacement, as well as the commodification of material and cultural resources, this youth revolt further animated the global justice movement with creative exuberance.

The Taco Bell boycott's brand-busting took this dissent an exciting step further, forging direct relationships between those whose lived suffering was concealed by the brand and those meant to consume branded products. SFA and CIW members drew nuanced connections between their converging forms of exploitation. In SFA's own words, "Both farmworkers and young consumers are objectified by the corporate food industry: farmworkers are seen as tractors that harvest raw materials cheaply while youth are seen as mouths that obediently consume branded products."<sup>100</sup> Taco Bell, they argued, discursively constructed young people as thoughtless, impulse-driven automatons; they likened the fog of consumerism to the dystopic system of social control portrayed in the *The Matrix*. At the same time (and with the complicity and financial resources of its consumer base), the fast-food giant materially exploited farmworkers in its supply chain. In another powerful metaphor, I recall a presentation in Seattle in 2004 where Gerardo described the linked forms of occupation we were fighting: occupation of Immokalee by agribusiness and occupation of our minds by corporate branding. The relation between supply chain workers and young consumers provided fertile ground for a powerful alliance.

In jointly formulating this analysis and creating space for shared reflection and action, the CIW and SFA challenge *distancing* along the production-consumption axis of

the food industry. In her study of female tomato workers in Mexico, Deborah Barndt unpacks this concept:

There are many dimensions to distancing, or the separation of raw-food production from the consumers of the final product . . . While political economy and commodity chain analysis will contribute to the analysis of the tangled routes of the tomato, the field of cultural studies helps us frame the experience from the consumption end, in which marketing and advertising produce not the food but its meaning and thus shape our experience of eating. (2007:69-70)

Thus the CIW-SFA brand-busting model echoes the work of cultural theorists such as Stuart Hall. Below, Hall describes how crisscrossing vectors of social reality mold our political horizons and shape possibilities for organized resistance:

More and more of our everyday lives are caught up in these forms of power, and their lines of intersection. Far from there being no resistance to the system, there has been a proliferation of new points of antagonism, new social movements of resistance organized around them – and consequently, a generalization of “politics” to the spheres which hitherto the Left assumed to be apolitical: a politics of the family, of health, of food, of sexuality, of the body. What we lack is any overall map of how these power relations connect and of their resistances. Perhaps there isn't, in that sense, one “power game” at all, more of a network of strategies and powers and their articulations – and thus a politics that is always positional. (cited in Sparks 1996:96)

I will further explore the positional and coalitional politics of the CIW and SFA in the final section of this chapter. Suffice to say, for the time being, this “map of resistance” resonated strongly with a wide swath of young allies from a variety of backgrounds.

### The Dominoes Begin to Fall

Taco Bell's target market revolt spread like a prairie-fire across the U.S. Students creatively took up the boycott and made it their own through organizing “Boot the Bell”

campaigns to remove Taco Bell restaurants from high school and college campuses. Between 2002 and 2005, students won hard-fought victories on twenty-three campuses including the University of Chicago, the University of Notre Dame, the University of California at Los Angeles and several other schools across the country. In spring 2004, student activism around the boycott hit fever pitch when Tony Rivas, a freshman at the University of Notre Dame active with MEChA, began a seven-day hunger strike as to pressure administrators to cancel Taco Bell's sponsorship of Notre Dame athletics. Rivas' fast ignited a rolling hunger strike around the U.S., involving, in some capacity, hundreds of students at the University of Florida, Grand Valley State (Michigan), Central Michigan University, and Eckerd College (Florida).

One of the more dynamic and lesser discussed episodes in the “Boot the Bell” campaign took place at Boise State University in Idaho. During the summer of 2004, administrators struck a deal with a large Taco Bell franchise to lease the naming rights of the basketball arena. Anger over the back room deal erupted in full force as students returned to class that fall. In October 2004, as part of a Pacific Northwest mini-tour, a delegation of CIW and SFA members visited Boise State students organizing to cut the contract with Taco Bell. Coincidentally, the Honorable Mary Robinson spoke at Boise State prior to the mini-tour visit, calling on the university community to reject its partnership with Taco Bell until the boycott was settled. A full-page advertisement in the Boise State newspaper, paid for by Taco Bell, greeted the CIW-SFA delegation and spread misinformation about farmworkers' wages and the boycott. In the ensuing days, a

faculty member resigned over in protest, and the faculty senate adopted a resolution 18-1 calling on the university to cut the contract. Student pressure was so intense that administrators were forced to move the December commencement from the indoor Taco Bell Arena to the outdoor football stadium.<sup>101</sup>

A few months later, on the eve of another Truth Tour, the first domino fell. On March 9, 2005, after four years of tenacious organizing, Taco Bell parent Yum Brands caved in to the CIW's demands. At the boycott-ending press conference in Louisville, Yum Vice President Jonathan Blum committed the world's largest restaurant company to “take a leadership role within our industry . . . and work with the CIW for social responsibility.”<sup>102</sup> The victory – surprising to everyone save the CIW and its closest allies – was achieved through multiple forms of escalating pressure that, while unable to impact Taco Bell's financial bottom line, took their toll on its public image. In the aftermath of the campaign, a Taco Bell senior spokesperson remarked, “they have very strategically reached out to college students as well as church organizations and other groups and we don’t like that there are groups of people out there who think we’re a bad company and we don’t care about the plight of the farmworkers.”<sup>103</sup> The U.S. Congressional Hispanic Caucus praised the agreement as, “perhaps the single greatest advance for farm workers since the early struggles of the United Farm Workers.”<sup>104</sup>

It is difficult to overstate the significance of these precedents and their potential for fundamental change in the fields, a topic to which I will return in the next chapter. However, in order to broadly reform the labor practices within Florida agriculture, the



CIW recognized it was necessary to expand the new principles throughout the fast-food and retail food industry. For the next two years, the Campaign for Fair Food utilized similar tactics against McDonald's, resulting in a breakthrough agreement on April, 8, 2007. McDonald's sudden decision to settle came just days before the Coalition planned to launch a boycott kicked off by an historic, nationwide grassroots mobilization, protest, and Latin American-style *carnaval* in Chicago, the hometown of the Golden Arches.<sup>105</sup> In May 2007, Yum voluntarily extended the agreement to cover its four remaining brands.

Burger King fell exactly one year later after a dramatic campaign that featured corporate espionage, Senate subcommittee hearings, two fired senior executives, and a 9-mile, 1,000-person march in November 2007 from Goldman Sachs office (partial private equity owner of Burger King) in downtown Miami to Burger King's headquarters under the banner of "Serfs up, kings down!" Following the May 2008 agreement with Burger King, the CIW reached an agreement with Austin-based Whole Foods Market on September 9<sup>106</sup> and with Subway on December 2, 2008. "Today," Gerardo Reyes said of the Subway accord, "the fast-food industry has spoken with one voice. With this agreement, the four largest restaurant companies in the world have now joined their voices to the growing call for a more modern, more humane agricultural industry in Florida."<sup>107</sup>

### Theorizing the Student/Farmworker Alliance

The Student/Farmworker Alliance represents a successful translation of the CIW's

organizing model to the topography of U.S.-based student activism. In that sense, the story of the CIW – and the Campaign for Fair Food – is actually an account of multiple translations of political practice from periphery to core: first, from the countryside of Haiti and Latin America to a remote town in southwest Florida; and second, from low-wage immigrant farmworkers to (relatively privileged) students, youth, and other allies. Like the Coalition, SFA maintains a constant emphasis on consciousness and developing leadership from the base; this is most evident in its educational activities during national and regional tours, campus presentations, “alternative spring break” visits to Immokalee, and its annual *encuentro*. SFA's organizing program is grounded in a cycle of reflection and action and informed by global vision of collective liberation. Furthermore, SFA's commitment to organizing with – not for – farmworkers toward community-led change not only acknowledges the workers' fundamental dignity and agency. It also reflects a sophisticated understanding of power and privilege as well as the productive tensions between autonomy and accountability. Lastly, SFA members' willingness to confront what Henry Giroux (2001) labels a “culture of cynicism” among their peers parallels the CIW's willingness to challenge apathy, fear and division within Immokalee.

The annual SFA *encuentros* – an obvious tip of the hat to the Zapatistas – provide a particularly rich site for further analysis. Each year the event bring eighty members of the far-flung SFA network to Immokalee for three days in order to assess the movement, deepen personal relationships, and develop campaigns. The SFA website elaborates:

In addition to planning strategy and sharpening our organizing skills, we hope to provide a space for discussion and reflection about the nature and significance of

our shared work in an age of corporate globalization, war, and empire. What are the meanings of solidarity and “alliance” in the 21st century? What are our global and local contexts, and what does this mean for our campaigns, strategies, and tactics?<sup>108</sup>

In years past, the *encuentros* have excelled at highlighting the local-global linkages in SFA's work, studying movements as diverse as indigenous struggle in Oaxaca, Mexico to food sovereignty and the MST in Brazil. No matter how sweeping and utopian aspects of the *encuentros* may be, however, their ballast is the pragmatic alliance and hard-nosed organizing that has yielded an incredible string of victories in the Campaign for Fair Food.

The *encuentros* also reveal how the Student/Farmworker Alliance, a self-described “decentralized network of diverse organizations and individuals,” is a product of the *cultural logic of networking*:

. . . the broad guiding principles, shaped by the logic of informational capitalism, which are internalized by activists and generate concrete networking practices. This cultural logic specifically entails a series of deeply embedded social and cultural dispositions that orient actors toward (1) building horizontal ties and connections among diverse, autonomous elements; (2) the free and open circulation of information; (3) collaboration through decentralized coordination and directly democratic decision making; and (4) self-directed networking. (Juris 2005:192-93)

In addition to molding the *encuentros*, these guiding principles – along with CIW ideals such as “we are all leaders” – inform SFA's organizational structure, which is comprised of a few full-time organizers in Immokalee; ad hoc working groups; a twelve- to fifteen-person steering committee from communities across the U.S.; and a fluid national base that eschews formal membership or affiliation. SFA occupies a hybrid space between the

liberation theology-influenced form and methods of the CIW and the postmodern logic of informational capitalism that shaped the global justice movement.

More broadly, SFA represents a “crossing network of consciousness,” to borrow a term from scholar Chela Sandoval (2000:181). Its consciousness is not only informed by subject formations *outside* the network (i.e., “farmworkers”) but difference *within* the network as well. The subject positions of “student” and “young consumer” are therefore strategically occupied. Sandoval writes:

All social orders hierarchically organized into relations of domination and subordination create particular subject positions within which the subordinated can legitimately function. These subject positions, once self-consciously recognized by their inhabitants, can become transfigured into effective sites of resistance to an oppressive ordering of power relations. . . . [This] is a particularly effective form of resistance under global late-capitalist and postmodern social conditions. (2000:55)

Most SFA members, however, are quite aware of the strategic nature of this essentialism – be it as “students” or “consumers” – since members are brought to the network by such varying motivations and from such disparate racial, gender, national, sexual, class and other identities. In our interview, Brian Payne also recalled:

Once I met the CIW, I realized that here I was, a white middle-class male in graduate school in the most powerful country in the world, and all I did was sit around and complain about stuff. And here was a group of workers who had everything against them but did not complain at all – they stood up and changed things. I particularly remember one of the workers in an interview talking about how he decided that he was no longer going to be solely shaped by those around him as an object of history, but he was going to stand up and fight as a subject in shaping history. I reflected on my own experiences growing up in Arcadia [Florida], how I sat back and did nothing as all of the changes took place around me, how those changes impacted me, and decided that from now on I would at least be a part of fighting back.

Another SFA member told me last fall:

By the beginning of the year in 2008, I came to the realization that as a domestic worker, I had no real rights. I was not being payed the salary amount promised to me, my hourly wages at another job was also lower, I did not always have guaranteed work. These conditions were very similar to what both farmworkers and domestic workers were experiencing throughout the country. And even though I knew I had a much milder case, I decided it made the most sense to try to . . . learn about the way the CIW organized.

SFA intentionally grapples with questions of multidimensional power relations.

The heartfelt unity in spaces such as the *encuentro* is not from a universalizing sameness that attempts to erase difference in the name of political expediency. Rather, it more closely embodies what Sandoval proposes: “a global decolonizing alliance of difference in its drive toward egalitarian social relations and economic well-being for all citizenry: an oppositional global politics; a cosmopolitics for *planeta tierra*” (2000:182). In the language of Donna Haraway, such postmodern political subjects, “are wary of holism, but needy for connection – they seem to have a natural feel for united front politics, but without the vanguard party” (1991:151). The Student/Farmworker Alliance and CIW are challenging both branded consumerism and the inequalities of global capitalism with innovative and efficacious coalitional politics. This blend of theory and action, as Marc Rodrigues concludes, just might change the world:

I see this work important insofar as it gets young people to think about larger issues such as consumerism, exploitation, and, ultimately, what kind of society – based on what kind of priorities – we want to live in.

And, finally, I guess it's just a matter of being part of a movement that is taking on corporate power and is actually winning and setting into motion some potentially deep changes in an industry that is really backward and needs to be changed. And I think that's a good thing for all of us who are thinking about how do we really

bring about change and whether it would be possible someday for social relations to be more humane . . . and egalitarian. Maybe what the CIW is doing today, like what the civil rights movement once did, will have something to do with – or will contribute in some small way – to that larger change, or at least to how we think about it.

## Conclusion

The Coalition's re-conceptualization of the agricultural industry to include the role of corporate food retailers and consumers set the stage for the launch of the Taco Bell boycott in 2001, drastically altering the course of its struggle for farmworker dignity. As a result of this strategic shift, the CIW began to forge alliances with heterogenous actors, including students, people of faith, labor and human rights activists, and others. These dynamic alliances were shaped, and in some ways made possible, not only by the CIW's political sensibilities but also by the diffusion of communication technologies and the rise of the movement for counter-hegemonic globalization. Over the past eight years, tens of thousands of workers and consumers have participated in the Campaign for Fair Food in diverse ways. The movement has won agreements with the world's four leading fast-food corporations as well as the largest so-called “natural” grocery chain. In doing so, it has set the stage for long-overdue reforms in Florida's fields. Still, in the final analysis, how do we assess the achievements of the CIW? It is this question that I take up in the closing chapter.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### A New Day Dawning in Florida Agriculture

It is our hope that today's farmworker movement will serve as one of many points on the horizon that inspires young people to believe in the possibility of a better world – a world where we all have space to realize our dreams.

-- Gerardo Reyes, CIW

Trying to envision “somewhere in advance of nowhere,” as poet Jayne Cortez puts it, is an extremely difficult task, yet it is a matter of great urgency. Without new visions we don't know what to build, only what to knock down. We not only end up confused, rudderless, and cynical, but we forget that making a revolution is not a series of clever maneuvers and tactics but a process that can and must transform us.

-- Robin D. G. Kelley

“Too often our standards for evaluating social movements pivot around whether or not they 'succeed' in realizing their visions rather than on the merits or power of the visions themselves,” notes Robin Kelley (2002:ix). Correspondingly, my goal with this final chapter is to strike an analytical balance between the spheres of the symbolic and the material, as the Coalition of Immokalee Workers and its allies have made significant contributions in both realms. By some accounts, the CIW has not “succeeded” since it has not yet achieved a fundamental transformation of labor relations in Florida's fields. Modern-day slavery remains an ever-present reality. More generally, workers are still denied a proper measure of dignity, and their labor is insufficiently remunerated given the specific hardships of agricultural labor. CIW member Romeo Ramirez captured this

perspective last summer, remarking, “We haven't succeeded yet; there is still a lot to do in Immokalee. Just look around.”

In a sense, Romeo is correct. Immokalee in 2009 is an exploitable labor reserve, strikingly similar to its portrayal in *Harvest of Shame* fifty years ago. Moreover, despite historic accords between the Coalition and the four largest fast-food chains in the world, farmworkers' wages are still at 1980 levels, largely as a result of grower resistance. The Florida Tomato Growers Exchange (FTGE), a major lobby group, organized to freeze the penny-pass-through mechanism that functioned successfully for two years following the 2005 Yum agreement. Since the 2007 season, the surcharges from Yum and McDonald's – and now Burger King, Subway, and Whole Foods – are being placed in a third-party escrow account. This stalemate will continue until either a sufficient number of growers choose to cooperate with the pass-through or an industry-wide labor surcharge is leveled, as has been done to offset rising fuel, pesticide, and fertilizer costs. Using the penny-per-pound as a baseline figure, an across-the-board surcharge would raise the tomato picking piece rate by nearly 80%.

The growers' deep hostility towards the CIW and an empowered workforce does not emanate from simple financial self-interest. To the contrary, the Campaign for Fair Food requires the corporate end-buyers of Florida tomatoes – not growers – to foot the bill for a higher picking piece rate. Furthermore, the campaign provides forward-thinking growers with an opportunity to lock in ever-larger market share as (relatively) socially responsible suppliers. Instead I argue that the growers' fierce antipathy towards change



stems from their plantation-owner worldview and notions of labor and race constructed from a backdrop of chattel slavery, displacement, peonage, and violence. Invoking the familiar trope of happy slaves to the none-too-impressed Senate Subcommittee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions, FTGE spokesperson Reggie Brown (2008) explained, “Just as our growers need the seeds, rain and Florida sunshine, we need the workers to harvest our crops. We value the services of our workers by paying and treating our workers fairly. The fact that thousands voluntarily return to our fields to pick tomatoes year after year, decade after decade, demonstrates that fact.” Happy slaves, indeed.

### Changing the Industry, Schooling the Governor

Still, there are hopeful signs. On March 26, 2009, Florida Governor Charlie Crist issued a public letter denouncing the scourge of slavery in his state. While this alone set him apart from his gubernatorial predecessors, he then added this bombshell: “I support the Coalition's Campaign for Fair Food . . . I encourage the Florida Tomato Growers Exchange and its members to participate in the campaign so that these monies can reach and provide assistance to the workers.”<sup>109</sup> While acknowledging the magnitude of Crist's announcement, Gerardo Reyes also cautioned:

There is, of course, much to be done. And the first order of business is for the Florida Tomato Growers Exchange (FTGE) to end its senseless opposition to our agreements with food industry leaders, so that farmworkers may receive the increased wages promised in those agreements. While the leadership of the FTGE may not yet realize it, the market around them is changing, and a more modern, more humane agricultural industry is undoubtedly in the interest of all the growers it represents. As John Chidsey, the CEO of Burger King, said in the announcement of our agreement last year, “If the Florida tomato industry is to be

sustainable long-term, it must become more socially responsible.” Today's announcement by Governor Crist also sends a strong message to the rest of the restaurant and supermarket industry: Now is the time to join Yum Brands, McDonalds, and Burger King, Subway and Whole Foods in righting the wrongs that have been allowed to linger in Florida’s fields for far too long.<sup>110</sup>

Crist's proclamation was not an act of unprompted, enlightened leadership. Rather, after two years of consistently rebuffing the Coalition's attempts at dialogue, he found himself in the eye of a public relations hurricane in the aftermath of the Navarrete slavery case.

Drawing on lessons learned from the Campaign for Fair Food, the CIW organized a public pressure blitz that resulted in a barrage of media coverage, pointed criticism from state and national faith and human rights organizations, and forty thousand emails to Crist's office. The climax of the campaign came on March 9 when a busload of workers traveled from Immokalee to dramatically re-enact the slavery case at a widely-attended press conference on the steps of the Florida capitol.<sup>111</sup> The next day, Crist reversed his position and arranged a meeting with the CIW, itself a civil rights landmark in a state where farmworkers have never sat at the table with the governor. He also issued the public statement, signaling to the growers that the days of tacit support for their labor practices were coming to end. The *Ft. Myers News-Press* editorialized, “Crist was slow to respond, but when he did, it was with commendable enthusiasm. . . . The farmworkers aren't much of a voting bloc and agribusiness is a powerhouse. But the coalition has a genius for making enemies look bad and winning public opinion wars. Crist must have finally figured that out.”<sup>112</sup> How times had changed since the days when the Sunshine State's political establishment could ignore the CIW without consequence!

Additional lessons can be drawn from the Coalition's experience with Governor Crist. The face-to-face meeting and his subsequent pledge of support for the Campaign for Fair Food would not have been possible without the broad ties forged between the CIW and its likely and unlikely allies. While farmworkers, students, people of faith, and human rights activists comprised the fulcrum of efforts to spotlight Crist's inaction, the CIW also pointed to its on-the-ground partnerships with the Department of Justice and the Federal Bureau of Investigation to garner credibility with Crist's office. While its strategic relationships with the state are embedded in contradictions, they have proven critical for the enforcement of anti-slavery laws and, as discussed earlier, have led to the liberation of more than one thousand captive workers in the past decade. The other unlikely allies in this narrative are, of course, the retail food corporations, all of whom initially resisted cooperating with the CIW. Nevertheless, the partnership between consumers, supply chain workers, and corporate retailers is setting in motion a bundle of long-overdue reforms in Florida's fields that will not be easily reversed. Governor Crist's actions were, at base, a calculated recognition of this trend.

There are four crucial precedents established by the CIW's corporate partnerships. First, the agreements between the Coalition and food retailers mark the first-ever direct payments by the end-buyers of Florida tomatoes to farmworkers in their supply chains. This is a critical point of distinction between the Campaign for Fair Food and previous farmworker secondary boycotts. Next, the CIW and food retailers are creating the first-ever, enforceable, supplier codes of conduct to improve human rights in Florida's fields.

These piecemeal agreements between the CIW and individual purchasers will eventually coalesce into an industry-wide code of conduct guided by the principle of worker participation in the advancement of their own labor rights. Third, the accords create powerful, long-term market incentives for tomato suppliers to go above and beyond the letter of the law in respecting their workers' human rights, including the right to overtime pay and the right to organize. Finally, these agreements cut through the murky system of layers in Florida agriculture and create transparency in the tomato supply chain since end-buyers must provide the CIW with records of their Florida tomato purchases and growers' wage records.

The far-reaching implications of these agreements sow the seeds for the abolition of modern-day slavery in the Florida agricultural industry. In the short term, the zero-tolerance policy for forced labor creates immediate market consequences for growers if an enslaved crew is found to be working in their fields. In a real sense, “growers must now pay for the sins of their crewleaders,” the CIW argues. In the longer term, the agreements will end the commonplace forms of exploitation – the sweatshops in the fields – that make forced labor possible in the first place. By improving farmworkers' lot across the board, crewleaders will no longer be able to easily manipulate a degraded labor environment to enslave invisible workers, “nobodies.” Indeed, the market power of the food industry – harnessed by workers and consumers – holds the key to reversing the race to the bottom in agricultural wages and working conditions.

It remains unclear the extent to which the Campaign for Fair Food may be

replicated in other sectors of the food industry. Analyst Raj Patel (2007) correctly points out that the global food system currently resembles an hourglass with large numbers of consumers and producers at each end and a bottleneck comprised of highly consolidated retailers and processors. “When the number of companies controlling the gateways from farmers and consumers is small,” he writes, “this gives them market power both over the people who grow the food *and* the people who eat it” (2007:12). The Campaign for Fair Food indicates that the bottleneck may prove to be the food system's Achilles' Heel given proper organizing strategies. While no two sectors within this complex are neatly identical, it is possible that like-minded organizations will learn what they can from the campaign and continue its tedious work of building a food system that does not rely on social immiseration. Patel argues that it is precisely rural social movements such as the CIW – and its peasant counterparts around the world – that “are leading the way in forging a new and different kind of food system. They do it out of necessity, for they are dying” (2007:14-15).

### Poetic Knowledge and the Struggle for Fair Food

Balancing principle and pragmatism, utopianism and a tactical war of position, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers' model for social change has proven resilient in the face of inhospitable political circumstances and resistance from powerful opponents. Indeed, the CIW – and social justice movements in general – can and must bring about material changes in peoples' lives. Yet this is not the whole story; they also deeply transform

participants' subjectivities, their understandings of themselves and the world they inhabit. It is this sea change in consciousness that enables people to chart cognitive maps of a better future. Expanding on this insight, Kelley speculates that, “progressive social movements do not simply produce statistics and narratives of oppression: rather, the best ones do what great poetry always does: transport us to another place, compel us to relive horrors and, more importantly, enable us to imagine a new society” (2002:9). The CIW is a powerful incubator of precisely this type of poetic knowledge. Invoking a distinct set of criteria from Romeo's at the beginning of this chapter, my former roommate, Eusebio, shared with me one night that he views the Coalition as successful, “because it gives people an education on who we really are: that we are not machines, that we do not have to endure slavery, that we do not have to be afraid.” Surely the power of this vision must be accounted for in any assessment of the movement's impact.

As I type these words, I reflect on other sources of poetic knowledge, of countless conversations with *compañeros* from Huehuetenango to Yonkers. I think of riding back to the packinghouse at dusk after picking up a final load of melons; of sometimes lonely –but never boring – late nights in the CIW office; of community meetings where one could almost *see* the energy in the air. I think of the sixteen-year old beaten for drinking water and the sheer force of the ensuing march. I think of the Root Cause march and a thousand people – grandparents and children among them – boldly heading into a locked-down city center. I recall the McDonald's victory celebration at the House of Blues in Chicago, the surreal blue and purple lights training CIW members while they addressed

the insanely hyped crowd in Spanish, Creole, Mam and Kanjobal. I think of the path ahead and our collective choices between nightmares and dreams. Dignity over slavery, consciousness over acquiescence. Together, we are all leaders.

## Notes

- 1 See Appendix A for full text of the speech.
- 2 “Labor department finds worker’s rights were not violated in alleged beating,” *Naples Daily News*, January 16, 1997.
- 3 “The Coalition of Immokalee Workers and the IWW,” May 12, 2001, <http://www.iww.org/culture/articles/CIW.shtml>.
- 4 See Falk (2002) and Santos (2006).
- 5 “Burger King VP puts self on grill; Daughter says dad wrote anti-coalition postings,” *Ft. Myers News-Press*, April 28, 2008.
- 6 “Burger With a Side of Spies,” *New York Times*, May 7, 2008.
- 7 See Appendix B for CIW’s testimony to the U.S. Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee.
- 8 Bernie Sanders, “Have it Your Way,” May 23, 2008, <http://www.sanders.senate.gov/news/record.cfm?id=298369>.
- 9 Coalition of Immokalee Workers, “Burger King Campaign Archive,” May 23, 2008, [http://www.ciw-online.org/BK\\_campaign\\_archive.html](http://www.ciw-online.org/BK_campaign_archive.html).
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 “Is Florida Just One New Development Away From Environmental Ruin?,” *AlterNet*, January 15, 2009, <http://www.alternet.org/story/119325/>.
- 13 RMPK Group, *Immokalee Inventory and Analysis Report* (Sarasota, Florida, July 2006), 8, <http://www.colliergov.net/Modules/ShowDocument.aspx?documentid=9355>.
- 14 “Florida Tomato Leader Fires Back at Senate Critics,” *The Packer*, April 18, 2008.
- 15 The University of Texas at Austin has historically been an important node for the Zapatista solidarity movement. This legacy was still felt in 2003 with the presence of student groups such as Acción Zapatista.
- 16 Miami Mayor Manny Diaz boasted of the police repression, “This should be a model for homeland defense” in “So far, so good for protests,” *Miami Herald*, November 19, 2003. For full account of the repression, see Democracy Now!, November 21, 2003, [http://www.democracynow.org/2003/11/21/mayhem\\_in\\_miami\\_amidst\\_tear\\_gas](http://www.democracynow.org/2003/11/21/mayhem_in_miami_amidst_tear_gas).
- 17 Greg Asbed is a co-founder and staff member of the CIW. Brian Payne co-founded SFA and worked as staff from 2000-2004 after completing his M.A. in Latin American studies at the University of Florida. Melody Gonzalez worked as SFA and Interfaith Action staff from 2005-2008 after completing her B.A. in political science at the University of Notre Dame. Marc Rodrigues worked as SFA staff from 2006-present after completing his M.A. in labor studies at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.
- 18 Coalition of Immokalee Workers, “CIW Theater, Press Conference in Tallahassee, FL,” March 9, 2009, [http://www.ciw-online.org/tallahassee\\_theater.html](http://www.ciw-online.org/tallahassee_theater.html).
- 19 “Foodies seek answers in Collier,” *Ft. Myers News-Press*, March 5, 2009.
- 20 “Family accused of enslaving workers at Immokalee camp,” *Naples Daily News*, December 7, 2007.
- 21 “Immokalee family sentenced for slavery,” *Ft. Myers News-Press*, December 20, 2008.
- 22 “Tomato companies, workers and fast-food firms square off,” *Miami Herald*, November 20, 2007.
- 23 “Immokalee family sentenced for slavery,” *Ft. Myers News-Press*, December 20, 2008.
- 24 Coalition of Immokalee Workers, “CIW Anti-Slavery Campaign,” January 2008, <http://www.ciw-online.org/slavery.html>.
- 25 See Bowe (2003; 2007) and Cockburn (2003).
- 26 For the complete text of the CIW’s acceptance speech – set against the surreal backdrop of the severe police repression against the FTAA protests in Miami – see Appendix C.
- 27 Coalition of Immokalee Workers, “CIW Anti-Slavery Campaign,” <http://www.ciw->



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- online.org/slavery.html.
- 28 Formed in 1943, the FFVA is another powerful statewide agribusiness lobby that has consistently fought against labor reforms. In 1974, the FFVA successfully influenced the Florida legislature to adopt anti-union “right to work” legislation. While this did not directly impact farmworkers (who are excluded from the provisions of the National Labor Relations Act), it underlies the anti-labor sentiments at the heart of the FFVA and, more broadly, the Florida agriculture industry.
- 29 *Palatka Daily News*, July 14, 2005
- 30 “Slavery in the Union,” *The Nation*, January 29, 2008, <http://www.thenation.com/blogs/edcut/277332>.
- 31 For more on this market-based approach, see Anti-Slavery International (2002) and Free the Slaves (2004).
- 32 Coalition of Immokalee Workers, “CIW Theater, Press Conference in Tallahassee, FL,” March 9, 2009, [http://www.ciw-online.org/tallahassee\\_theater.html](http://www.ciw-online.org/tallahassee_theater.html).
- 33 See Appendix A.
- 34 See Appendix B.
- 35 Coalition of Immokalee Workers, “Facts and Figures on Farmworker Poverty,” 2007, [http://www.ciw-online.org/images/Facts\\_and\\_Figures\\_07.pdf](http://www.ciw-online.org/images/Facts_and_Figures_07.pdf).
- 36 See “Farm workers' rights 70 years overdue,” *New York Times*, April 5, 2009.
- 37 “Politics of the Plate: The Price of Tomatoes,” *Gourmet*, March 2009, <http://www.gourmet.com/magazine/2000s/2009/03/politics-of-the-plate-the-price-of-tomatoes>.
- 38 For a richly textured literary account of daily life in Florida during this time, see Hurston (2000).
- 39 U.S. Department of Labor, *Farm Labor Developments* (Washington, DC, April 1966), Florida Christian Migrant Ministry Collection, Box 1, Folder 10, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.
- 40 Such agricultural practices include the heavy use of synthetic fertilizers, pesticides and higher-yielding seed varieties; mono-crops; and intensive mechanization. For a more focused discussion on the Green Revolution, see Shiva (1991).
- 41 Florida Department of Agriculture, *Florida Agricultural Statistics* (Tallahassee, 1962), Florida Christian Migrant Ministry Collection, Box 1, Folder 13, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.
- 42 U.S. Department of Labor, *Economic Profile of Florida* (Washington, DC, May 1966), Florida Christian Migrant Ministry Collection, Box 1, Folder 10, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.
- 43 Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services, *Florida Migrant Health Project Seventh Annual Progress Report, 1968-1969* (Tallahassee, 1970), Florida Christian Migrant Ministry Collection, Box 5, Folder 10, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.
- 44 See Murphy et al. (2001) and Smith and Furuseth (2006) for a discussion of the impact of Latino immigration on the U.S. South.
- 45 Others scholars, such as Hale (2006), argue that neoliberalism is more than a bundled set of political-economic reforms; rather it is also a form of governance that aims to create self-governing political subjects.
- 46 For more on the global coffee crisis, see Oxfam America (2002).
- 47 For a gripping account of migration across the heavily militarized U.S.-Mexico border, see Urrea (2004).
- 48 See Appendix D.
- 49 Florida Tomato Committee, “Florida Tomato Facts and Sizes,” <http://www.floridatomatoes.org/facts.html>
- 50 “The Human Cost of Industrial Tomatoes,” *Gristmill*, March 5, 2009, <http://gristmill.grist.org/story/2009/3/6/121656/8459>
- 51 Lucas Benitez testified to the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions, “In

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- 1997, during the 30 day hunger strike by six of our members, a friend of ours asked a grower why they weren't willing to talk to us, and the grower answered, 'Let me put it to you like this – the tractor doesn't tell the farmer how to run the farm.' That's how they've always seen us – as just another tool, and nothing more." For the full text of his testimony, see Appendix B.
- 52 Coordinating Committee for Farm Workers, "Correspondence to Florida Legislative Candidates," March 1, 1967, Florida Christian Migrant Ministry Collection, Box 4, Folder 32, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University; Florida Christian Migrant Ministry, *Report from Annual Meeting*, 1970, Florida Christian Migrant Ministry Collection, Box 3, Folder 1, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University
- 53 "Why the United Farm Workers are zeroing in on Florida," *St. Petersburg Times*, March 11, 1973; "UFW Avoids Citrus War – So Far," *Florida Trend*, January 1973; "Man of the Year?," *Florida Agriculture*, December 1972.
- 54 "Farm workers threaten strike for better pay," *Clearwater Sun*, December 24, 1976.
- 55 "Migrant workers' drive to organize was chilled by nature," *St. Petersburg Times*, March 28, 1976.
- 56 "Striking tomato pickers gain United Farm Workers support," *Palm Beach Times*, December 11, 1978.
- 57 "3 charge peonage on area farm," *Miami Herald*, June 18, 1976; "State accused of increasing farmworker poverty," *Ft. Myers News-Press*, October 29, 1980.
- 58 MPP founder and agronomist Chavannes Jean-Baptiste won the 2005 Goldman Environmental Prize.. For more information, including a video that details his organizing practices, see <http://www.goldmanprize.org/node/112>.
- 59 Coalition of Immokalee Workers, "Timeline of Farmworker Organizing in Immokalee: History of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers and its Allies," 2006, in author's possession.
- 60 Gonzalez (2005) also provides an excellent oral history of several CIW members describing their experiences with popular education and conscientization.
- 61 For a deeper critique of resource mobilization theory in the context of the CIW, see Rodrigues (2006).
- 62 Dan Moffett referred to Lucas Benitez as the "Cesar Chavez for the new millennium" in his editorial, "Slavery? In Florida? In 2003? Yes," *Palm Beach Post*, November 23, 2003.
- 63 These cards are frequently displayed to bosses in order to address short-term workplace grievances.
- 64 "Radio Conciencia testimony on media ownership," *Reclaim the Media*, May 1, 2007, [http://reclaimthemedial.org/legislation\\_and\\_regulation/immokalee\\_workers\\_radio\\_consci=5182](http://reclaimthemedial.org/legislation_and_regulation/immokalee_workers_radio_consci=5182)
- 65 Coalition of Immokalee Workers, "Community Center," January 28, 2009, [http://www.ciw-online.org/Community\\_Center.html](http://www.ciw-online.org/Community_Center.html)
- 66 "The Human cost of industrial tomatoes," *Gristmill*, March 5, 2009, <http://gristmill.grist.org/story/2009/3/6/121656/8459>
- 67 See Appendix E, "Los Decididos," for the lyrics from a *corrido* penned during the 1995 strike; "Farmworkers strike for wages," *Naples Daily News*, November 14, 1995; "Immokalee group seeks better wage," *Ft. Myers News-Press*, November 25, 1996.
- 68 Manuel Castells (1983) elaborates: "[Spatial forms] will express and perform the interests of the dominant class according to a given mode of production and to a specific mode of development. . . . At the same time, spatial forms will also be marked by resistance from exploited classes, oppressed subjects, and abused women. And the works of this contradictory historical process on space will be accomplished on an already inherited spatial form, the product of history and support of new interests, projects, protests, and dreams. Finally, from time to time social movements will arise, challenging the meaning of a spatial structure and therefore attempting new functions and new forms" (311-12).
- 69 After fleeing Haiti on boats following the 1991 coup against Aristide, Matye and many of his comrades were detained by the U.S. Coast Guard at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. Hence the nickname, "Guantánamos" to describe this second, more politicized wave of Haitian immigrants. In 2000, Matye replaced Jean Claude on the CIW staff.
- 70 "Farm workers strike for higher wages," *Naples Daily News*, December 2, 1997; "Workers strike for

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- higher pay,” *Ft. Myers News-Press*, December 3, 1997; “Farmworkers win 25 percent pay increase,” *Naples Daily News*, December 6, 1997.
- 71 “Fasting workers say a few can speak for the many,” *Naples Daily News*, January 18, 1998; “6 farmworkers stop eating to protest low pay in the fields,” *Naples Daily News*, December 21, 1997.
- 72 “A month of fasting, an industry at risk,” *Naples Daily News*, January 18, 1998.
- 73 “3 Fla. farm workers give up hunger strike after Carter plea,” *Washington Post*, January 19, 1998; “Farm workers end hunger strike,” *USA Today*, January 19, 1998; “Florida tomato pickers take on growers,” *New York Times*, February 1, 1998.
- 74 Following the hunger strike, people of faith established Religious Leaders Concerned with a mission to educate faith communities about Immokalee farmworkers’ struggle; this was the organizational antecedent of Interfaith Action of Southwest Florida (IA).
- 75 “Farmworkers trek to Tallahassee but miss governor,” *Naples Daily News*, December 18, 1999.
- 76 During the 1995 strike, Collier County sheriffs allowed workers to occupy the Pantry Shelf parking lot. Likely under pressure from the growers, the sheriffs pushed protestors across the street during future strikes. This tactical response undermined the strikers ability to disrupt the morning pick-ups in the parking lot. At the same time, as a result of the 1995 strike, crewleaders set up a number of smaller, alternate pick-up sites throughout Immokalee.
- 77 For an excellent, firsthand description of the march, see Payne (2000). Also, “Farmworkers begin trek for better pay,” *Naples Daily News*, February 20, 2000; “Farm workers begin trek,” *Ft. Myers News-Press*, February 20, 2000.
- 78 “Tomato pickers march to Orlando for 'living wage, representatives of growers have no plans to meet with the farm workers,” *Osceola Sentinel*, March 3, 2000.
- 79 These schools include Florida Gulf Coast University, New College, the University of South Florida, the University of Florida, Florida State University, and the University of Miami.
- 80 “Shipper takes non-conformist approach,” *The Packer*, December, 1999.
- 81 Coalition of Immokalee Workers, “Taco Bell Boycott Frequently Asked Questions,” September 2004, <http://www.ciw-online.org/FAQs.html>
- 82 “Penny Foolish,” Op-ed, *New York Times*, November 29, 2007.
- 83 “Big fast-food contracts breaking tomato repackers,” *The Packer*, May 16, 2005.
- 84 “Florida farmworkers – No, no quiero Taco Bell,” *Reuters*, September 10, 2001.
- 85 If the penny-per-pound piece rate increase were applied industry-wide, it would raise tomato harvesters earnings from roughly 45 cents per 32 lb. bucket to 77 cents, a nearly 80% increase. This is still well below where the piece rate should be had it kept pace with inflation since 1978.
- 86 During the 2003 hunger strike, the CIW asks: “Can Taco Bell guarantee its customers that the tomatoes in its tacos are not picked by forced labor?” On the fifth day, over 1000 allies join the strikers in front of Taco Bell headquarters. Over 100 solidarity actions take place. For a sample of media coverage, see “Farm workers end hunger strike against Taco Bell,” *Reuters*, March 4, 2003; “Taco Bell tomato pickers on slave pay” *Guardian* (UK), March 17, 2003. During the 2004 Truth Tour, the CIW visited both Taco Bell (Irvine, CA) and Yum (Louisville, KY) headquarters. In Louisville, the CIW hangs workers' donated dirty clothes on a “security fence” erected by Yum. Farmworkers also construct a pyramid of 120 tomato buckets to represent the amount of tomatoes a worker must pick to earn minimum wage for a typical ten-hour day. In California, over 1,500 allies join the CIW for the last day of the 44-mile march and rally at Taco Bell Headquarters. Speakers and performers include Lila Downs, Boots Riley, and Tom Morello, California State Senator Joe Dunn, and author Eric Schlosser.
- 87 See <http://allianceforfairfood.org/>
- 88 See Deegan (2001) for an example of one prominent guide to “dealing with activists and pressure groups.”
- 89 For more on the CIW and the human rights framework, see Asbed (2007); Holden (2008); and Smith (2008)

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- 90 For example, see “Like Nike, Taco Bell must not support suffering,” *Tallahassee Democrat*, May 3, 2001.
- 91 “Peaceful protest puts focus back on IMF,” *Washington Post*, April 14, 2003.
- 92 The keynote at the conference, which was organized by the CIW, Student/Farmworker Alliance and Interfaith Action, was given by the late, Louisville-based anti-racist activist Anne Braden.
- 93 “Root Cause Community Impact Report,” November 11, 2003, p. 2. In author's possession.
- 94 The EZLN is not held in universally high regard among Immokalee's immigrant farmworkers. More than a few claim to have had negative experiences with the organization and consider themselves in opposition to its methods or goals.
- 95 In this section, Zugman names her key source, “Ellen Leary, organizer with the CIW.” In fact, Elly Leary is not an organizer with the CIW. She is a retired autoworker and UAW member who occasionally volunteers with the CIW, particularly on issues of labor movement strategy, during the winter months while she resides in Naples.
- 96 “Globalisation's children strike back,” *Financial Times*, September 11, 2001.
- 97 University of Notre Dame students visited Immokalee during March 2001 as part of an “alternative spring break” organized by their Center for Social Concerns. To my knowledge, they became the first students to take up the boycott outside of Florida.
- 98 Some examples of SFA Days of Action include: “Four Days of Spooky Action” in solidarity with protests against the FTAA ministerial meeting in Quito, Ecuador (40 communities participate, Oct. 31-Nov. 3, 2002); “Monstrous Day of Action” supporting 2004 Taco Bell Truth Tour (100 actions, March 5, 2004); “1-2 Punch Against McDonald's” (40 communities participate; Oct. 27-28, 2006); and the “King-Doom Day of Action Against Burger King” (30 actions, Nov. 12, 2007).
- 99 Coalition of Immokalee Workers, “Taco Bell Marketing, the Matrix, and You,” 1 April 2001, <http://www.ciw-online.org/tbnyoumatrix.html>.
- 100 Student/Farmworker Alliance, “Organizing Philosophy,” 2009, <http://sfalliance.org/orgphilosophy.html>
- 101 For a near-complete archive of media coverage of SFA organizing, visit <http://sfalliance.org/media.html>
- 102 “Coalition of Immokalee Workers, Taco Bell Reach Groundbreaking Agreement” March 8, 2005, <http://www.ciw-online.org/we%20won.html>.
- 103 Stelzer, Andrew, “Taco Bell Truth Tour: CIW & Civil Rights Movement,” March 2005, [http://radio.indymedia.org/uploads/truth\\_tour\\_civil\\_rights.mp3](http://radio.indymedia.org/uploads/truth_tour_civil_rights.mp3)
- 104 Coalition of Immokalee Workers, “News and Highlights from the Boycott's Final Year,” March 2005, <http://www.ciw-online.org/2004-05news.html>
- 105 After a string of sleepless nights, the planned Carnival for Justice & Dignity in downtown Chicago was converted into an unforgettable Concert for Fair Food at the House of Blues. With an over-capacity crowd of 2,000 people, the CIW and allies from thirty states celebrated their incredible victory over McDonald's. Former Rage Against the Machine musicians Tom Morello and Zack de la Rocha played together on stage for the first time since the band's breakup seven years earlier.
- 106 The agreement with Whole Foods Market (WFM) differed sharply from previous accords in two important ways. First, it marked the first agreement reached with a major grocery retailer. Second, WFM, as the world's leading “natural foods” retailer, has publicly positioned itself as a socially responsible corporation despite its well-documented anti-labor stances. I will further explore these contradictions in forthcoming analyses.
- 107 Coalition of Immokalee Workers, “Subway: What They're Saying,” December 2, 2008, [http://www.ciw-online.org/Subway\\_what\\_theyre\\_saying.html](http://www.ciw-online.org/Subway_what_theyre_saying.html)
- 108 Student/Farmworker Alliance, “2008 Encuentro,” August 2008, <http://sfalliance.org/2008encuentro.html>
- 109 Letter from Florida Governor Charlie Crist to the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, March 26,

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- 2009, [http://www.flgov.com/pdfs/20090326\\_immokalee.pdf](http://www.flgov.com/pdfs/20090326_immokalee.pdf)
- 110 “Governor Crist letter to CIW”, March 27, 2009, <http://www.ciw-online.org/news.html>
- 111 See “200 Immokalee farmworkers protest at Capitol, ask governor to support end to slavery,” *Naples Daily News*, March 9, 2009; “We cannot continue to ignore farmworkers,” *Tallahassee Democrat*, Op-ed, March 11, 2009.
- 112 “Crist finally joins battle,” Editorial, *Ft. Myers News-Press*, March 31, 2009.

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## Appendix A

### Speech by Lucas Benitez (CIW) at United Nations on Occasion of First World Social Justice Day, February 10, 2009

I first want to thank Mrs. Robinson and the other organizers for holding this event. It is a tremendous honor to be invited to address an audience such as this in a setting as inspiring as the United Nations.

I come here today representing the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, a community-based labor organization rooted in the town of Immokalee, Florida. Immokalee is a labor reserve, similar in its demographics and socio-economic character (90% young, single immigrant males doing stoop labor for poverty-level wages in the agricultural industry) to the labor reserves of Brazil and South Africa. I come here representing some of the worst-paid, least-protected, most marginalized workers in the US today.

Federal prosecutors bestowed my community with the title "ground zero for modern-day slavery." With seven major slavery prosecutions in Florida's fields over the past decade alone, cases that have liberated a total of well over 1,000 workers and put more than 15 farm bosses behind bars, the Florida agricultural industry stands without peer in the field of forced labor.

But, as US Senator Bernie Sanders said at the conclusion of his fact-finding visit to Immokalee last year, "The extreme is slavery, the norm is a disaster." And it is that disaster – sub-poverty wages, no right to overtime pay, no right to organize, and systemic labor rights violations, etc. – that makes slavery possible. Slavery can not exist in a vacuum. Rather, as is the case for farmworkers in Florida, it takes a population already beaten down by poverty and endless humiliation to both: 1) embolden a boss to step over the line from everyday exploitation into slavery and, 2) sufficiently disempower thousands of men and women so that they accept without protest that most vile violation of their rights as human beings.

It was these conditions that prompted us to organize 15 years ago with three simple demands: a fair wage, an end to labor rights abuses, and a voice in the industry in exchange for the backbreaking and dangerous work that we do, without which there would be no industry.

Our struggle was born in community-wide strikes targeting major Florida growers and protests demanding action from state politicians. But since the year 2000, we have focused our efforts on what we call the "Campaign for Fair Food." Our campaign calls on the largest corporate buyers of Florida produce – companies like McDonald's and WalMart – to demand more humane labor standards from their suppliers, and to help

make those higher standards possible by paying a reasonable price premium to be passed on to workers in the form of higher wages. It is similar to the well-known "Fair Trade" movement, though different for its focus on plantation-scale producers, the leadership role of workers in its promotion, and its target – the US agricultural industry.

The Campaign for Fair Food came about through two key realizations. First, following several marginally successful strikes, our search for how to move forward forced us to look beyond the farm gate for answers. Once we made that conceptual leap, we found powerful forces further up the supply chain that actually had a hand in shaping conditions on the farm itself – through the downward pressure they were able to exert on farm prices. Specifically, we found that the major corporate buyers of Florida produce proudly touted their ability to demand ever lower prices by combining the buying power of tens of thousands of stores or restaurants into purchasing coops. It didn't take long before we realized that same process could be reversed – if sufficiently motivated, those companies could direct that same overwhelming purchasing power to buy only from growers willing to improve farm labor conditions and, at the same time, use a fraction of their vast economic resources to help willing growers raise farm labor wages.

Second, we realized that we would grow old pitting our meager ability to mobilize public opinion against the food industry's almost infinite lobbying influence in a battle to recruit political leaders to our cause. Do we think the government should take strong and unequivocal measures to end modern-day slavery, enforce existing labor law, and grant farmworkers the same rights other US workers enjoy? Of course we do. We'd love nothing more than to see a significantly beefed up Department of Labor, new laws that made growers strictly liable for the slavery committed by their labor contractors, and an end to the exclusion of farmworkers from the Fair Labor Standards Act and the National Labor Relations Act.

However, no politician ever won office on the promise to triple the Department of Labor's budget, and farm labor justice has never been a plank of any successful politician's platform. Given the urgent need for change in our community, we did not have the luxury to spend resources on what was clearly a losing battle to change long-established political priorities.

On the basis of those two insights – that the food industry itself provided perhaps the shortest route to significantly improving farmworkers' lives, while the government could offer only limited support for change – we have developed a hybrid market/state approach to cleaning up human rights violations in the food industry, one driven by market forces and nudged in the proper direction by the intervention of the state.

The Campaign for Fair Food has had remarkable success in its short existence, winning agreements with the world's four largest restaurant companies as well as the world's

largest organic grocery chain, but there is still much to be done achieve the systemic change that is its goal. There is a field, however, where the food industry has made far greater strides against a significant industry problem - and that is the field of food safety. A brief look at the industry's experience in that field – in the fight against food-borne illness – can perhaps be instructive as to how we can best proceed in combining market and state forces in the fight against farm labor exploitation and slavery.

There is a positive chain reaction that occurs when word of a salmonella or e-coli outbreak hits the news. First, public health officials identify the problem and the news media give the outbreak generous coverage. Next, consumers drastically cut back consumption of the tainted product, prompting the major brands that buy and sell the product to immediately and without remorse suspend purchases from the guilty supplier (often, only the possibility of guilt is sufficient to affect a supplier's sales). Over time, the major brands develop tougher and tougher food safety standards and demand that their suppliers implement the new codes or lose their business. The message to the produce industry is clear: Get caught as the source of a food safety outbreak and face an almost certain total loss of business; fail to meet the buyers' higher food safety codes and slowly lose contracts with long-standing clients on your way to being frozen out of an evolving market that has left you behind. The only answer for any produce supplier looking to stay in business is to step up to the higher standards.

While food-borne illness outbreaks continue today, over time the government has grown more effective in identifying them, codes have grown more stringent, and the worst actors have been identified and improved or driven from the industry. The fight against food-borne illness is advancing.

What would it take for us to achieve this same result in the case of the fight against food-borne injustice? When government officials identify an "outbreak" of slavery in our food system (in this case, successfully prosecute yet another slavery operation) we run into the first break in the chain – the media coverage of slavery is at best anemic, at worst non-existent. Still, thanks to the efforts of tens of thousands of already aware consumers across the country, there is some pressure exerted on the major brands that buy the product picked by slave labor. In the case of the Campaign for Fair Food, that pressure has resulted in the agreements I mentioned earlier. But those agreements are with only a small percentage of the overall market, and as a result, the produce suppliers implicated in the slavery operation receive a mixed message from their clients, some cutting off purchases, some expressing concern, and some showing no concern at all. Produce suppliers learn that it might be good, but is by no means mandatory, to address the problem, and slavery persists.

This suggests two possible roles for increased state intervention in the fight against slavery that, combined with stronger private action, could do for slavery what has been

done for salmonella. First, the bully pulpit occupied by leaders from the local to the federal levels can – and must – be employed in efforts to eliminate farm labor exploitation. From local representatives and state governors to the US Congress and the White House, much can be done (public statements, hearings, investigations, etc.) to help ramp up the media attention and consumer awareness that are so crucial to the success of a market-led approach. And second, by conditioning state support to the food industry (tax incentives, financial assistance, continued anti-trust exemptions, etc.) on its ability to demonstrate that it respects the basic right to decent work, the state can encourage the major produce purchasers and producers to adopt an unequivocal position of zero tolerance for slavery.

With this sort of practical and political support from elected leaders, consumers and the corporations that purchase produce will be able to demand a new product from the US agricultural industry – not just good, cheap, and safe food, but fair food, food that respects human rights and doesn't exploit human beings.

Food is at the very heart of any society. The workers who plant, pick, and pack food throughout the US – and around the world – have suffered generations of poverty and degradation. On this day, the very first World Social Justice Day, let us recognize the fundamental dignity of farm labor and the men and women who put the food on our tables. Thank you.

## Appendix B

### **“Because a Tractor Doesn’t Tell the Farmer How to Run the Farm”**

Testimony by Lucas Benitez (CIW) Before the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee, April 15, 2008

Good Morning. It is a tremendous honor to be here today testifying in front of this committee in such a storied institution as the United States Senate.

I thank you for this once in a lifetime opportunity.

At the same time, of course, the reason I am here is very troubling. The sad fact is that we are here today because there is slavery in the fields in the United States in the 21st century.

Exactly 200 years ago, in an act now mostly forgotten in the pages of history, the Congress of the United States voted to end the importation of slaves into this country.

200 years ago, the opponents of that law argued that the slaves were happy with their lot, that they were certainly better off than where they came from, and that agriculture in this country would surely collapse if this law were to pass.

200 years ago, the choice before Congress seemed very complicated and controversial. But in the end, the people's representatives voted in favor of human rights and so advanced the cause of human dignity.

Today, 200 years later, I sit before you representing the Campaign for Fair Food – a campaign with the objective of eliminating modern-day slavery and sweatshop conditions in the fields of Florida.

I work with the Coalition of Immokalee Workers. Our members pick tomatoes and oranges during 8-9 months of the year and then follow the crops up the East Coast during the summer.

I came to this country from Mexico at the age of 17 with the hope of being able to help support my parents and my family. I began to work in the harvest of oranges and tomatoes.

The job of picking tomatoes is hard and heavy, dirty and dangerous. You run all day under a burning sun with a 32-pound bucket on your shoulder, carrying it from the row where you are picking to the truck where you dump it out -- and back -- that is when you

aren't stooped over picking tomatoes. At the end of the day the cramps don't let you sleep.

Not only is your body exhausted, but so is your spirit after having to put up with the yelling of your supervisors all day.

One example from my own experience may help to illustrate that point. One day a few years ago, I was working on a very isolated farm staking tomatoes.

I got ahead of the rest of the crew and when I stopped for a moment to catch my breath, the boss yelled at me, got down from his truck, and he threatened to beat me up if I didn't go back to work immediately.

I was alone in the middle of hundreds of acres of fields, miles from any town. One of our reasons for organizing the Coalition was so that no one would ever have to feel that alone again in the fields.

For women who work in the fields, in addition to putting up with all of that, they also have to endure an environment charged with sexual harassment.

And workers know that if you try to complain about these abuses the next day you'll have no work.

All that I've mentioned is what happens to workers who are free. Forced labor is something else altogether.

Others here will speak in more detail about slavery, but I assure you that the seven cases that have been uncovered in the fields of Florida are just the tip of the iceberg.

Countless more workers have suffered the humiliation of beatings, rapes, and wage theft by their bosses over the last ten years, and today we have more cases that are being investigated that aren't yet in court.

Truly, my job here today – to paint a picture for you of the life of a farmworker – is almost impossible.

It is so difficult because, for years, farm work has been the exclusive domain of such a small and marginalized portion of the overall US population that the vast majority of Americans for several generations now, have no context in which to understand the reality of work in the fields.

And the growers know this well. That is how they have been able to make the clear seem

complicated, and the obvious so controversial.

Take the issue of wages, for example.

Incredibly, even this issue – that farmworkers are poor – has been made complicated with the growers' statements that farmworkers earn an average of \$12.46 per hour when picking tomatoes.

To dispute that, I could cite reports from the US Department of Labor, an objective source that confirms the obvious – that farmworkers are the poorest and least protected workers in the country.

Or I could cite the opinion of a respected voice from the industry, the editor of "Produce Business" Magazine, who says that the growers' public relations strategy of focusing on an hourly wage could never cover up the fact that farm work is a full time job with irregular hours with which a farmworker will never be able to get his family out of poverty.

But these arguments are just more words. I want to make this as clear as possible.

And so I say to you today: Fine. We'll take it.

If Mr. Brown can guarantee \$12.46 an hour, backed up by a verifiable system of hours with time clocks in the fields, and thereby eliminate the antiquated system of work by the piece, we'll take it.

If they say they pay already \$12.46 an hour, then there should be no problem with really paying it.

Unfortunately, I don't have to be a fortuneteller to know their response.

If we really want to put an end to this eternal debate about farmworkers wages, it's simple: have the tomato industry implement a surcharge the same way they've done three times in the last few years to cover other production costs – like pesticides and diesel.

And just like with the other surcharges -- there will be no impact on the market.

But in this case, the money won't be going to Exxon or to Monsanto, but directly to the families of thousands of the poorest workers in the country.

To close, I want to tell you a story from our past.



In 1997, during the 30 day hunger strike by 6 of our members, a friend of ours asked a grower why they weren't willing to talk to us, and the grower answered, "Let me put it to you like this – the tractor doesn't tell the farmer how to run the farm."

That's how they've always seen us – as just another tool, and nothing more.

But we aren't alone anymore. Today there are millions of consumers with us willing to use their buying power to eliminate the exploitation behind the food they buy.

A new dawn for social responsibility in the agricultural industry is on its way.

With the help of Congress, and with the faith that the complicated will be made clear under the purifying light of human rights -- today, just as it was 200 years ago – we will witness the dawn of that new day. Thank you.

## Appendix C

### Speech by Lucas Benitez (CIW) at U.S. Capitol upon Receiving Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Award, November 20, 2003

Mrs. Kennedy, Senator Kennedy, and Mrs. Kerry Kennedy, I bring you thanks from all the members of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers for this wonderful day.

But before I begin, I feel that I must tell you that today my compañeros and I feel a little disoriented, as if we were lost in a sort of dream world where you can no longer know just what is real.

Just two days ago, we marched into downtown Miami surrounded by nearly 3,000 police – police in riot gear, mounted police, police on bicycles, police on foot, police in helicopters hovering above Miami's skyline, their propellers beating out the soundtrack to what seemed to us like a movie about martial law in the US – all because we were there to call for fair trade that respects human rights, not free trade that exploits human beings.

Yet today, we stand here in this historic city – in the heart of the US government – receiving this prestigious award for our work in defense of human rights.

Truth is, my compañeros and I are confused. It's hard for us to understand in which of the two worlds we actually live – in the world where the voice of the poor is feared and protest in defense of human rights is considered the gravest of threats to public security? Or in the world where the defense of human rights is celebrated and encouraged in the pursuit of a more just and equitable society?

While this question may well be the most complex and important question that we must face in this new century, there is no doubt about how Robert F. Kennedy would answer were he still with us today. He – like that other great hero who was torn away from us 35 years ago, Dr. Martin Luther King – would have been there with us in the streets of Miami, quite possibly feeling the same fear we felt facing such overwhelming force arrayed against us, but carried forward by faith and and by his powerful commitment to social justice.

This award today is the proof, testimony to Robert Kennedy's vision, his belief that we as workers and poor people also are part of this democracy, that our voices must be a part of this country's great chorus and our interests taken into account, because without justice, true peace, lasting peace, is not possible.

Looking around at the people here today – we see workers and CEO's, students and religious, artists, politicians, prosecutors from the Department of Justice, union leaders,

friends, family members, colleagues from the Freedom Network, shareholders, civil rights activists – I can assure you that it isn't ever day that you find all these people in the same room!

But in all seriousness, we are united here despite our different lives and points of view. What brings us together is a feeling that we all have in common, something deeply rooted in our humanity – we are all disgusted by the fact that fundamental human rights continue to be violated in this day and age in this great country.

Behind the shiny, happy images promoted by the fast-food industry with its never-ending commercials on tv, fueled by over \$3 billion in marketing annually, and behind the supermarket advertising that celebrates the abundance of our harvest each Thanksgiving, there is another reality.

Behind those images, the reality is that there are farmworkers who contribute their sweat and blood so that enormous corporations can profit, all the while living in sub-poverty misery, without benefits, without the right to overtime or protection when we organize. Others are working by force, against their will, terrorized by violent employers, under the watch of armed guards, held in modern-day slavery. The right to a just wage, the right to work free of forced labor, the right to organize – three of the rights in the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights – are routinely violated when it comes to farmworkers in the United States.

Is this the true face of democracy in the 21st century? Is this all we can hope for our future and for our children's future?

We answer from the bottom of our hearts: NO! We can – we must – hope for a better world, because a better world IS possible!

So, it's left to us to continue struggling in that same spirit, for a world where poor people, people without a voice, demand and obtain the respect and dignity due to them, where corporations no longer define the limits of our liberty, where they don't dictate our dreams, fence in our imagination, and block the roads toward our destiny.

And in this same spirit, I want to close with a special greeting to all our fellow members of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers. We had to leave the march in Miami in order to come here, but they are continuing with the struggle, continuing with the work of building, step by step, another better world.

As Robert F. Kennedy said, "Some see the world as it is today and ask why. I see the world as it could be and ask, why not?" His vision of 35 years ago is by no means lost – we of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers are marching toward that vision today.

## Appendix D

### Indigenous Resistance Day and Taco Bell Boycott Call to Action, October 12, 2004

We, the members of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW), declare:

"No one discovered us, we were always here." Over 500 years ago, on October 12, 1492 Columbus proclaimed our discovery. After the invasion of the Americas, a large part of the civilizations that had existed since the beginning of time were destroyed. But many of us continue surviving and struggling.

"We are still here, and still resisting." Half a millennium later, we, the indigenous people of the Americas; we who speak Canjobal, Mam, Quiche, Mixteco, Zapoteco, and other languages; we who have been displaced from our communities and forced to emigrate to the United States by corporate greed and free trade agreements (e.g. NAFTA) declare: time and time again powerful elites have wanted to silence our voices, and for centuries we have resisted.

Today, those indigenous workers who have immigrated to Immokalee and work in the tomato harvest earn wages of 40-45 cents per 32-pound bucket, wages that have been stagnant for 20 years – all with no benefits, no right to organize and, in the most extreme cases, facing slavery in the fields of Florida while forced to work at gunpoint. Every time that major buyers of the tomatoes we pick, such as Taco Bell and YUM Brands (Taco Bell's parent company), demand cheap tomatoes without thinking about the misery in which agricultural workers live, they benefit from our exploitation.

It is for this reason that today the members of the CIW, men and women of the corn, those of us who carry with us the indigenous spirit and who have indigenous blood running through our veins, are calling on everyone to struggle against corporate greed by boycotting Taco Bell.

Join our National Day of Action against Taco Bell to demand justice for farmworkers; your community can protest in front of Taco Bell, send postcards to YUM Brands, and unite this October 12th with millions of people across the continent in the struggle for indigenous rights by celebrating "International Indigenous Resistance Day."

Remember, as long as exploitation persists in the fields or in any other part of the world, none of us can be considered free. To exploit one is to exploit all! Boycott Taco Bell!

## Appendix E

### “Los Decididos,” A *Corrido* Celebrating the General Strike of November 1995

Estos versos que yo canto  
Se convierten en corrido  
Para recordar a ustedes  
Lo anterior ya sucedido

Siendo el 12 de noviembre  
Una fecha distinguida  
Por primera vez que todos  
Nos unimos con valor  
Protestando por el sueldo  
Y por un trato mejor

Siendo el 12 de noviembre  
Del año 95  
En la mera madrugada  
Trabajadores y mujeres  
Comenzaron a gritar

Defendiendo sus derechos  
Y protestando a los demás  
A patrones abusivos  
Y diciendo ya no más

Hasta aquí nos aguantamos  
No nos vamos a dejar  
Porque todos nos unimos  
Entre gritos y tambores  
Y gritando huelga, huelga

Los patrones espantados  
Preguntándose que pasa  
Porque vieron las razas  
Unidas estaban ya  
Defendiendo sus derechos  
Y haciéndolos valor

Estos versos que he cantado  
Son los versos de mi gente  
Tomateros y chileros, naranjeros y demás  
Mexicanos y Haitianos  
Entre otras razas mas  
No hubo nada que temer  
Siendo el 12 de Noviembre  
En el mero amanecer

## Appendix F

### Consciousness + Commitment = Change

The following websites provide information and resources to take action for Fair Food:

Coalition of Immokalee Workers – <http://ciw-online.org>

“The CIW is a community-based worker organization. Our members are largely Latino, Haitian, and Mayan Indian immigrants working in low-wage jobs throughout the state of Florida.”

Alliance for Fair Food – <http://allianceforfairfood.org>

“The Alliance for Fair Food (AFF) is a network of human rights, religious, student, labor, sustainable food and agriculture, environmental and grassroots organizations who work in partnership with the CIW, an internationally-recognized human rights organization working to eliminate modern-day slavery and sweatshop labor conditions from Florida agriculture.”

Student/Farmworker Alliance – <http://sfalliance.org>

“Student/Farmworker Alliance (SFA) is a national network of students and youth organizing with farmworkers to eliminate sweatshop conditions and modern-day slavery in the fields.”

Interfaith Action of Southwest Florida – <http://interfaithact.org>

“Interfaith Action educates and animates people of faith to partner with the CIW in its efforts to improve wages in the fields, and put an end to modern-day slavery in the agricultural industry.”

Just Harvest USA – <http://justharvestusa.org>

“Just Harvest USA aims to build a more just and sustainable food system with a focus on establishing fair wages, humane working conditions and fundamental rights for farmworkers. We achieve this through broad public education and mobilizing support for farmworker-led and other grassroots campaigns.”

## Vita

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