

# Supermarkets, Tomatoes and Farmworker Justice

by Sean Sellers

Last November, the previously unthinkable happened – farmworkers and representatives of the \$620 million Florida tomato industry announced an end to their decade-long labor conflict with a symbolic handshake and signed accord.

The landmark agreement between the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW), an internationally recognized workers' organization based in southwest Florida, and the Florida Tomato Growers Exchange (FTGE) will cover over ninety percent of the state's tomato farms and improve pay and conditions for 30,000 farmworkers. The industry is responsible for nearly all fresh tomatoes grown in the U.S. between November and June.

"This is a watershed moment in the history of Florida agriculture," said Lucas Benitez of the CIW. "With this agreement, the Florida tomato industry – workers and growers alike – is coming together in partnership to turn the page on the conflict and stagnation of the past and instead forge a new and stronger industry."

"This is the beginning, not the end, of a very long journey," continued Benitez. "But with this agreement, the pieces are now in place for us to get to work on making the Florida tomato industry a model of social accountability for the 21st century."

Hope is indeed on the horizon, thanks to the efforts of farmworkers, consumer activists, Florida tomato growers, and nine multinational fast-food and foodservice corporations who have joined in support of the CIW's Fair Food principles: *McDonalds, Taco Bell, Burger King, Bon Appetit, Subway, Whole Foods, Aramark, Sodexo and Compass Group.*

These principles include a wage increase, a strict code of conduct, a cooperative complaint resolution system, a participatory health and safety program, and a worker-to-worker education process. This unfolding process marks a sea change in Florida and U.S. agriculture.

With the sole exception of Whole Foods Market, however, the \$550 billion supermarket industry is refusing to do its

part. While resistance is perhaps to be expected from grocery goliaths such as Giant, Stop & Shop, Publix, Kroger and Walmart, the indifference of Trader Joe's – considered by some analysts to be one of the "world's most ethical companies" – is quite baffling.

Yet that is exactly the position of the quirky cheap-chic retailer, and, along with the rest of the supermarket industry, the effect may be to significantly diminish farmworkers' brightest hopes for change in several decades.



Tomato farmworker in the field.  
Photo Credit: Scott Robertson

## The Campaign for Fair Food

When consumers browse through the produce aisles at their local supermarkets, they are often unaware of the hidden exploitation behind the displays of fresh fruits and vegetables.

Sub-poverty wages, the denial of basic labor rights, sexual harassment, health and safety risks, and wage theft are commonplace for U.S. agricultural workers. The Department of Labor describes farmworkers as a "workforce in significant economic distress," citing annual earnings of less than \$12,500 to support its conclusions.

In extreme cases, workers have been held against their will and forced to work for little or no pay with threats or the actual use of violence. Since 1997, a total of nine such farm labor slavery operations have been prosecuted in Florida. The CIW has been involved in the discovery, investigation, and prosecution of seven of those operations, helping to liberate well over 1,000 workers.

The CIW's Campaign for Fair Food seeks to improve wages and working conditions for Florida tomato pickers by calling on major buyers of tomatoes to pay a premium of one penny more per pound for their tomatoes, ensure that this penny is passed down directly to farmworkers, and work together with the CIW to implement a code of conduct in their supply chains.

Since the breakthrough with the FTGE, many changes are already evident on some of the state's largest farms. For the first time ever, many farmworkers now have a reliable mechanism to ensure proper payment for hours worked, as well as a grievance procedure to address abuses or violations of the code of conduct.

Many workers are also receiving a wage increase from the penny per pound, combined with an end to the over-filling of buckets, a standard practice in the industry that can reduce worker's piece rate wages by as much as ten percent.

"For this new model to achieve its full potential, however, retail food industry leaders must also step up and support the higher standards," explains Gerardo Reyes, also of the CIW. "Key players in the fast-food and foodservice industries have already committed their support. It is time now for supermarket industry leaders to seize this historic opportunity and help make the promise of fresh – and fair – tomatoes from Florida a reality."

Without the supermarket industry paying into the penny-per-pound program and conditioning their purchases on the Fair Food principles, workers' raises are shorted and the push to improve working conditions is undermined.

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Tomato farmworkers in the field. Photo Credit: Scott Robertson

### Will the Supermarkets Step Up?

By pooling their massive purchasing power, supermarket chains are able to demand deep discounts from their suppliers.

Unfortunately for farmworkers, it is

precisely this type of high-volume, low-cost purchasing that has created strong downward pressure on wages and working conditions as suppliers look to cut costs in order to maintain profit margins. Supermarket chains may not

have created farmworker poverty, but they continue to play an active, and profitable, role in perpetuating it.

Since 2007, the CIW and its allies have called on supermarket chains to support the emerging solution to the human rights crisis in Florida's fields. This call is even more urgent given recent developments with the FTGE.

Yet with the exception of Whole Foods, supermarkets still refuse to join the Fair Food program. It is increasingly clear that the supermarket industry is attempting to shirk responsibility to pay into the system, short workers of its portion of the pay increase, and refuse to tie its purchases to the Fair Food principles.

Until this untenable position changes, supermarket chains can expect growing discontent from farmworkers and consumers alike. ■

## To Tell the Truth: Who Owns Fair Trade?

by Phyllis Robinson

When TransFair USA announced last fall that it was changing its name to Fair Trade USA, an immediate and ongoing tsunami of outrage and indignation burst through the Fair Trade community. Alternative Trade Organizations, 100% Fair Trade roasters, student, religious, and consumer activists, and non-profit organizations, all of whom have dedicated themselves to the difficult but critically important work of building market access for small farmers across the globe, were affronted. How could any single organization, a certifying agency no less, claim the name Fair Trade? Fair Trade is a concept, a way of doing business, a value system, an entire movement built through the convictions and hard work of hundreds of thousands of individuals across the globe. Can one organization simply appropriate all that "Fair Trade" signifies, and claim it for itself?

Reactions to the announcement have differed, but mainly span from disappointment to anger. Some are dismayed that TransFair would undertake such a divisive move, thereby attracting



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bad publicity and potentially hurting those for whom Fair Trade is most supposed to benefit. Others are more indignant, seeing this step as one more in a long line of "corporate-like attitudes and behaviors" that blatantly disregard

and steamroll over the legitimate concerns of others in the movement. Still others give TransFair credit for devising such a bold marketing move: just when your organization is encountering growing public relations challenges,

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