



The Coalition of Immokalee Workers

About the CIW



Consciousness + Commitment = Change: How and why we are organizing

The CIW is a community-based organization of mainly Latino, Mayan Indian and Haitian immigrants working in low-wage jobs throughout the state of Florida.

We strive to build our strength as a community on a basis of reflection and analysis, constant attention to coalition-building across ethnic divisions, and an ongoing investment in leadership development to help our members continually develop their skills in community education and organization.

From this basis we fight for, among other things: a fair wage for the work we do, more respect on the part of our bosses and the industries where we work, better and cheaper housing, stronger laws and stronger enforcement against those who would violate workers' rights, the right to organize on our jobs without fear of retaliation, and an end to forced labor in the fields.

From the people, for the people: Who we are

Southwest Florida is the state's most important center for agricultural production, and Immokalee is the state's largest farmworker community. As such, the majority of our approximately 5,000 members work for large agricultural corporations in the tomato, citrus and other harvests, traveling along the entire East Coast following the harvest in season. Many also move out of agriculture and into other low wage industries that are important in our area.

We are all leaders: Our history

We began organizing in 1993 as a small group of workers meeting weekly in a room borrowed from a local church to discuss how to better our community and our lives.

Combining three community-wide work stoppages with intense public pressure – including an unprecedented month-long hunger strike by six of our members in 1998 and an historic 234-mile march from Ft. Myers to Orlando in 2000 – our early organizing ended over twenty years of declining wages in the tomato industry.

By 1998, we had won industry-wide raises of 13-25% (translating into several million dollars annually for the community in increased wages) and a new-found political and social respect from the outside world. Those raises brought the tomato picking piece rate back to pre-1980 levels (the piece rate had fallen below those levels over the course of the

intervening two decades), but wages remained below poverty level and continuing improvement was slow in coming.

Our Anti-Slavery Campaign

While continuing to organize for fairer wages, we also turned our attention to attacking involuntary servitude. Over the past 15 years, 9 major investigations and federal prosecutions have freed over 1,200 Florida farmworkers from captivity and forced labor, leading one US Attorney to call these fields "ground zero for modern slavery."

The CIW was key in the discovery, investigation, and prosecution of seven of those operations. Through these efforts we helped pioneer anti-trafficking work in the US, contributing to the formation of the Department of Justice Anti-Trafficking Unit and the passage of the landmark Trafficking Victims Protection Act in 2000.

Secretary of State Clinton presented CIW with the 2010 Hero Acting to End Modern-Day Slavery Award, in recognition of "perseverance against slavery operations in the US agricultural industry" and "determination to eliminate forced labor in supply chains."

Our Anti-Slavery Campaign has earned national and international recognition based on its innovative program of worker-led investigation, human rights education, and a track record of real success. The CIW is a co-founder of the national Freedom Network USA to Empower Enslaved and Trafficked Persons. We are also co-founders and Southeastern US Regional Coordinator for the Freedom Network Training Institute, conducting trainings for law enforcement and social service personnel in how to identify and assist slavery victims. At the state level, we are members of the US Attorney's Anti-Trafficking Task Forces for Tampa and Miami, as well as Florida State University's statewide Working Group against Human Trafficking through its Center for the Advancement of Human Rights.

The Campaign for Fair Food

The corporate food industry as a whole – companies such as Kroger, Publix, Ahold USA and Walmart – purchases a tremendous volume of fruits and vegetables, leveraging its buying power to demand the lowest possible prices from its suppliers, in turn exerting a powerful downward pressure on wages and working conditions in these suppliers' operations.

With this realization, in 2001 we turned a new page in our organizing, launching the first-ever farmworker boycott of a

major fast-food company – the national boycott of Taco Bell – calling on the fast-food giant to take responsibility for human rights abuses in the fields where its produce is grown and picked.

Over its four years, the Taco Bell boycott gained broad student, religious, labor, and community support. In March 2005, amidst growing pressure, Taco Bell agreed to meet all of our demands to improve wages and working conditions for Florida tomato pickers in its supply chain.

Following the successful conclusion of the Taco Bell boycott, the national network of allies that had helped carry that campaign to victory consolidated to form the Alliance for Fair Food, signaling the corporate food industry that the Campaign for Fair Food would not stop at Taco Bell. The AFF became a powerful new voice for the respect of human rights in this country's food industry and for an end to the relentless exploitation of Florida's farmworkers.

In April of 2007 – in the culmination of a two-year battle with the largest restaurant chain in the world, McDonald's – the Campaign for Fair Food took an important new step forward. With an announcement at the Carter Center in Atlanta, McDonald's and the CIW reached a landmark accord that met and expanded the standards set in the Taco Bell agreement.

A year later, Burger King became the third fast food giant to agree to work with the CIW. Soon after, the campaign broke new ground with its first agreement in the supermarket industry when leading organic foods retailer Whole Foods Market agreed to do the same. By the end of 2008, Subway, the largest fast food purchaser of Florida tomatoes, had also come to the table.

We then turned our focus to the food service provider industry, and agreements with Bon Appétit Management Co., Compass Group, Aramark and Sodexo followed in 2009-2010.

The Fair Food Program: A New Day in the fields...

In late 2010, we signed an agreement with the Florida Tomato Growers Exchange to extend the CIW's Fair Food principles – including a strict code of conduct, a cooperative complaint resolution system, a participatory health and safety program, and a worker-to-worker education process – to over 90% of the Florida tomato industry. This watershed moment ended a 15-year impasse and was hailed in the New York Times as "possibly the most successful labor action in the US in 20 years." With that agreement, the Fair Food Program was born.

Today, bolstered by the independent auditing and oversight of the Fair Food Standards Council (FFSC), the Fair Food Program

– which emerged from the successful Campaign for Fair Food and seeks to affirm the human rights of tomato workers and improve the conditions under which they labor – has begun an unprecedented transformation of farm labor conditions in Florida's fields.

Millions of additional dollars are flowing into the industry each year from participating buyers, to be passed on by the growers to their workers to increase wages. Audits are revealing and addressing systemic weaknesses that in the past led to worker abuse. Workers receive ongoing education from the CIW – on the farm and on the clock – about their new-found rights and responsibilities under the Program. And complaints from the fields are investigated and resolved by the FFSC.

But the pace, depth, and sustainability of this transformation will ultimately depend on the participation of *all* the major purchasers of Florida's tomatoes. Despite widespread support for the innovative, collaborative solution at the heart of the Fair Food Program, the supermarket industry (with the notable exceptions of Whole Foods and Trader Joe's) has yet to do its part, and is thus the one remaining obstacle in the way of long-awaited, sustainable change in the fields.

Immokalee today: Nothing is impossible...

Over the past several years, through the Campaign for Fair Food and our anti-slavery work, and culminating with the emergence of the Fair Food Program, Immokalee has evolved from being one of the poorest, most politically powerless communities in the country to become today an important national and statewide presence with forceful, committed leadership directly from the base of our community – young, migrant workers forging a future of livable wages and modern labor relations in Florida's fields.

In recognition of their work, three CIW members were presented the prestigious Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Award, the first and only time the award had gone to a US-based organization. In recent years, the CIW and the Campaign for Fair Food have also been recognized with the first-ever Natural Resources Defense Council "Food Justice Award" in 2012; as 2010 "People of the Year" by the Ft. Myers (FL) News-Press; and with the 2009 Salem Award for Human Rights and Social Justice, the 2008 Sister Margaret Cafferty Development of People Award by the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, the 2007 Anti-Slavery Award by Anti-Slavery International (the oldest international human rights organization in the world), World Hunger Year's 2006 Harry Chapin Self-Reliance Award, the Freedom Network's 2006 Wellstone Award, and the Business Ethics Network's 2005 and 2009 BENNY Awards.

