

Fair Food Now!

By Anne Winkler-Morey



Photos: Jacques-Jean Tiziou

As the plane sinks below the clouds on a flight to Fort Myers, its windows reveal a sea of black: flat, uninterrupted rows divided by ditches of blue stretching into the horizon. These farms are a secret to most of the millions who vacation in Southwest Florida, and are beyond the radar of many who reside here. But eight months of the year 100,000 farm workers turn Florida dirt into gold, planting and harvesting winter vegetables, including the lion's share of this country's fast food and grocery store tomatoes.

I'm flying to South Florida to participate in a two-week, 200-mile walk (March 2-15, 2013) for the rights of the farm workers who pick these tomatoes. The march is sponsored by the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW). The Coalition and its allies have been working for three decades to end endemic abuses in the fields. They have uncovered numerous cases of unpaid and forced labor and slave-like conditions. Workers are paid a piece-rate poverty wage. Often they are denied access to shade, water, health care for work-related illness, and a way to redress grievances. A common grievance for women is sexual harassment.

For the first few years the CIW negotiated with Florida growers to bring wages back up to 1980s levels. In 1999, the CIW came up with a novel strategy, enlisting the growers as allies in a combined effort to demand a premium from large-scale tomato buyers that would go directly to farmworkers. This "Fair Food" campaign involved a two-pronged approach:

1. One penny more per pound, paid by the buyer—a calculus that amounts to almost doubling annual wages for most workers.
2. The establishment of workplace human rights standards aimed to end abuses like forced overtime, the right not to have to overfill one's bucket, and the right to complain about abuses without retribution. Signers of the Fair Food agreement also agreed not to buy from errant growers.

The Fair Food campaign represents a realization that the biggest profiteers in the agribusiness equation are the fast food and grocery chains whose wealth is built on the backs of farm workers. The campaign began with a boycott of Taco Bell—successful after four years. College students in Student Farm Worker Alliance chapters on campuses across the nation played a large role in the success of this boycott. Since the Taco Bell success, 10 other companies were targeted and, one by one, they signed on, including McDonald's, Burger King, Chipotle, and the grocery store chains Whole Foods and Trader Joe's.



The farm worker exclusion to the 1935 National Labor Relations Act is still in place and is strengthened by a punitive immigration system. Marchers want increased wages, dignity and justice.

Photo: Jacques-Jean Tiziou

The Coalition is now focused on the Florida grocery chain Publix and the fast food chain Wendy's. Publix is a giant in the South with 1,069 stores and sales of \$27.5 billion in 2012, according to its website. As Bernice Powell, North American president of World Council of Churches, put it, Publix is big enough to hold up or bring down the feudal agribusiness practices that have existed in Florida since slavery. CIW organizers agree: Publix is key to capturing the entire South Florida tomato market.

The Wendy's campaign engages activists nationally. On May 18 they gathered in New York to confront stockholders. All over the country activists are leafleting Wendy's, educating customers and petitioning local franchise owners. Last winter several of us turned customers away from the restaurant on Lake Street and Minnehaha in Minneapolis. The Wendy's campaign will continue until the fast food chain signs the Fair Food Agreement.

The members of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers are from Haiti, Mexico, and, primarily, Guatemala. The Guatemalans bring to South Florida memories of civil war and U.S. intervention on the side of brutal dictators, and the superb organizing skills they developed as a result. Because Guatemala is a land of dozens of indigenous nations, CIW members also bring their experience of working cross-culturally and in several languages.



If large-scale tomato buyers paid one more penny per pound it would amount to almost doubling the wages of the poorly paid field workers.

Photos: Jacques-Jean Tiziou



In March of 2013, as the former Guatemalan dictator José Efraín Ríos Montt faced charges of crimes against humanity, some of the survivors of his regime of terror were marching in South Florida pronouncing a “New Day” for farm workers.

For fourteen days we marched, two by two, shouting, singing, chanting, dancing down the highways and byways of South Florida, following a flatbed truck with a

sound system blasting Latino favorites and Aretha Franklin. Live musicians serenaded us with janeras, the small banjo-like instrument that accompanies soulful singing popular in Mexico and the Latino United States. For much of the march we followed Highway 41, taking a lane, slowing traffic, walking behind a police escort. Young super-humans among us ran the whole course, zigzagging to leaflet every person that emerged from a car or building. We discovered that 15 to 18 miles of marching in a day is possible, even for those of us who are not superhuman, if the music is lively and the speeches inspiring.

Music brought people out of their homes and stores to see what was happening. We carried placards in the shape of tomatoes and bushel baskets, with the words "One more penny! Dignity!" and "Publix Profits from Farmworker Poverty," and waved bright yellow flags that proclaimed a "New Day for Farm Workers." In between songs the organizers on the truck spoke through a mike that could be heard for a couple of blocks: " Good Morning, Port Charlotte," "Good afternoon, Sarasota," "Hello, Tampa!" "We are headed to Lakeland to tell Publix to come to the table and sign the Fair Food agreement. Join us! Honk for justice! You can do it!"

Those who ventured out of their homes, gas stations, bars, beauty parlors, and Publix grocery stores lifted cell phones and tablets to record the parade. They were witnessing something extraordinary in this "Right-to-Work" state: a forceful, disciplined display of united labor strength by some of the nation's lowest wage workers and their allies.

The organization of this march was supreme. The South Florida NAACP, and 45 local Unitarian, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Catholic churches provided food and water breaks and floors for our sleeping bags. Students at Florida State University provided a meal. Other entities, including retreat centers, private schools, and a YMCA provided showers. March participants were divided into "families" to take on housekeeping tasks. Two hundred backpacks and suitcases needed to be loaded and unloaded from U-Hauls each morning and evening. A school bus driver transported us from the march sites to our sleeping floor, every night. One woman got up at 5:00 a.m. every morning to get the coffeepots going. Four people did laundry for the whole group every three days. An activist from Tucson, who performs emergency medical care with No More Deaths/No Mas Muertos, (an organization that serves immigrants walking across the Arizona desert), provided foot care at every stop to a line of patients that grew with each passing day.

On the sixth day we marched into Sarasota, pausing for a 30-minute picket line at a Publix. Our group swelled as local church and student groups and passersby joined us. Our circle covered two blocks. On the 11th day we walked over a bridge with a view of downtown Tampa, the largest city on the trip. Again our numbers multiplied as we gathered at a local Publix for a candlelight vigil and Light Brigade.

To a marcher, these infusions of support were heady. When buses and vans from Boston, New York, Washington, D.C, Nashville, Denver, Cincinnati, San Diego, and

Minneapolis joined us for the final weekend it felt as though we had to overcome. On the morning of the 17th, when we gathered at a Publix in Lakeland to begin our final day, I got the feeling the Publix personnel could feel it too: Marchers arrived in groups of four and five, 10 and 20, a seemingly endless parade of food-justice organizers, small farmers, UNITE HERE members, immigration rights activists, and consumers who crave the taste of justice. When we covered the sidewalk of the Southside Mall, taking to the streets in groups of three, it seemed as though our numbers could only keep growing.

Social justice and success for the Coalition of Immokalee Workers is not just measured in winning signers to an agreement, but also in building coalitions for the long term.



Music sustained the marchers on the 200-mile walk through South Florida. Future actions will be sustained by the momentum of this march.

Photos: Jacques-Jean Tiziou



After all, the plantation economy has been with us for a long time now. It was bolstered by post-Civil War sharecrop and tenant farming systems, and protected by the still-in-place farmworker exclusion to the 1935 National Labor Relations Act. (The NLRA codified in law the right of workers to organize unions, collectively bargain and strike. In response to the pressure from Southern lawmakers, domestic and farm workers, who then were primarily black, were excluded. In California the United Farm Workers successfully lobbied for a Farmworker NLRA, but it only

covers that state.) The plantation economy is strengthened in the 21st century by an immigration system that criminalizes undocumented farmworkers who make up about 50 percent of the annual workforce, and a guest-worker system that creates a second-class labor force with workers who can not organize, settle where they work and live with loved ones, or change employers, a system that encourages abuse. (In the current immigration reform debate, farmworkers' advocates are calling for legalization, while employer advocates are pushing for the expansion of the guest-worker program.) With each new Fair Food signature the old plantation system undergirding modern U.S. agribusiness loses strength.

As we head back to Minnesota, the plane is filled with Twins fans, in Fort Myers during spring training to support their team as they prepare for a new season. The Coalition of Immokalee Workers is also preparing for a new season, one with dignity and justice for farmworkers—go, team!

Twin Cities activists are planning a full schedule actions this summer targeting Wendy's, including weekly pickets at the Lake and 26th street Wendy's, a run/ walk and a bike ride from one Wendy's to the others, and cultural events, on the last Saturday of each summer month. For questions and to get on the list for upcoming events: email Anne at winkl002@umn.edu

Anne Winkler-Morey participated in the March for Rights, Respect and Fair Food, marching 11 days and 166 miles. She teaches ethnic studies and history at Metro State University.