

## Rotten Tomatoes: Truths about Exploited Tomato Field Laborers

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Many of the workers in the tomato fields in Florida are illegal immigrants that are being abused as human beings. This modern day slavery keeps the prices of tomatoes down at the cost of abusing the workers that pick them. The workers are paid less than \$10,000 a year for what is often a fifteen hour work day. Organizations such as the Coalition of Immokalee Workers in Immokalee, Florida have been working to end the atrocities happening to exploited farmworkers since the practice of employing illegal immigrants began after the end of the Bracero Program in 1964.

The average tomato picking worker in Florida is an illegal immigrant or the child of illegal immigrants. Coyotes, as they are called, lead immigrant farmworkers on a safe passage to the United States so they can earn more money for their families. The increase in wage may be much higher than what the workers would earn in their native country, however, it is not acceptable by American minimum wage standards. In addition to not earning enough money for their work, the laborers are often forced to return their salary for the costs of living usually provided by their employer. The workers must pay for the many 'debts' that they have accrued by being brought to America and being forced into provided housing. Not being from the United States, most workers do not know that they have rights that should protect them from this kind of mistreatment. Consumers should work alongside organizations such as the Coalition of Immokalee Workers to end the human rights abuses that plague what has become the United States of America's lowest labor class.

Most tomato field workers' days start out the same. Author and *New York Times* contributor John Bowe recounts one such day of a tomato picking worker in Immokalee, Florida, describing:

Between four-thirty and five o'clock every morning, a convoy of crudely painted red and blue school buses arrives at a parking lot on South Third Street, a block from Main Street, to carry workers to the fields. In the afternoon, the buses return, and the sidewalks fill with weary men, many wearing muddy rubber boots, their shirts and pants stained deep green from the juice of tomato leaves. (Ninety per cent of the town's migrant population are men.) In the evening, workers wear tucked-in Western shirts, baseball caps or cowboy hats, and Reebok knockoffs. Some stay home to wash their few items of clothing or cook dinner; those with time left on their phone cards line up in parking lots and on street corners before

seemingly innumerable pay phones (a staple of migrant towns) to call Chiapas, Oaxaca, Huehuetenango. (Bowe)

The farmworkers are often immigrants that have come into the country illegally and are unaware of their rights. Investigative reporter and author of *Fast Food Nation* Eric Schlosser has written extensively on food labor in America and elaborates more on circumstances that worsen farmworkers' conditions by saying, "They are usually employed by labor contractors, who charge them for food, housing, transportation -- and, on occasion, smuggling fees. These charges are often deducted from workers' paychecks, trapping migrants in debt" (Schlosser). Long time columnist for the *Miami Herald* Fred Grimm writes, "At night, the cargo door was locked shut with the most troublesome workers inside. If they needed to relieve themselves, the only option was a designated corner" (Grimm). The workers endure such conditions to continue earning less than a dollar for each 32 pound bucket of tomatoes they pick.

One of the first organizations to help farmworkers preserve their rights was the United Farmworkers of America, started by Cesar Chavez in 1962. The Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) is a non-profit organization of mostly immigrants working in low-wage jobs in Florida and is working in a similar fashion to improve the jobs of field laborers. The CIW strives "...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." Essentially, this organization fights for a fair wage for farm laborers and improved workers' rights. They advocate the need for improved, but still cost efficient housing and the ability to organize/protest without the fear of retaliation ("About"). Long time abolitionist and editor of the website Change.org, Amanda Kloer reports that the CIW delivered a petition to major tomato purchasing, southern grocery store chain Publix to pay more money per pound for tomatoes (Kloer). The CIW has done other related projects and has gained national attention since its inception in 1993.

The CIW also serves as a watchdog group that monitors and reports issues related to immigrant workers. They reported one incident where employers were charged for beating and punishing workers that would not work or attempted to leave their job of picking tomatoes ("Anti-Slavery"). Many laborers are new each season and are unlikely to speak English. Additionally, many laborers are unfamiliar with their personal rights as they adjust to living in the United States (Bowe). This combination leads workers to be "workers are reluctant to discuss abusive situations with employers, much less with bolillos, or white Americans, for fear of losing their jobs and being labeled troublemakers" (Bowe). Bowe continues to explain that since many are undocumented workers, they live in fear of being seized by immigration services and being deported. Employers understand this threat and use it to their advantage to keep these workers in line (Bowe).

On top of this type of brutality, most laborers make far less than minimum wage. John Bowe claims in an article that "Farmwork in Mexico pays about five or six dollars a day--when it's available" (Bowe). He indicates that through interviewing several illegal immigrant farmworkers that they believe their new wage, low by American minimum standards, is one their lucky to

have (Bowe). However, not all of that pay stays with the workers; Eric Schlosser notes that the illegal immigrant migrant workers “are usually employed by labor contractors, who charge them for food, housing, transportation -- and, on occasion, smuggling fees. These charges are often deducted from workers' paychecks, trapping migrants in debt” (Schlosser). Since immigrant laborers are scared of being reported, they often do not work with union organizers or other groups to prevent this exploitation. This is the same situation faced by post World War II illegal workers.

The Coalition of Immokalee Workers believes that the conditions in the fields are slave-like. The Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) defines slavery as “compelled service using a number of different terms: involuntary servitude, slavery, debt bondage, and forced labor” (“What Is”). This law protects immigrants that are “trafficking victims regardless of whether they once consented, participated in a crime as a direct result of being trafficked, were transported into the exploitative situation, or were simply born into a state of servitude” (“What Is”). By defining the different forms of slavery, this law helps establish standards to protect migrant workers from falling into “modern slavery.” Secretary of State Hillary Clinton is quoted as saying “Modern slavery – be it bonded labor, involuntary servitude, or sexual slavery – is a crime and cannot be tolerated in any culture, community, or country ... [It] is an affront to our values and our commitment to human rights” (qtd. in “Office to Monitor”). The statement embodies the values of the people and government of the United States.

While there are laws in protect immigrant and migrant populations, the United States Department of State suggests ways for ordinary citizens to combat human trafficking, such as:

Be a conscientious consumer. Make socially responsible investments. Let your favorite retailers know that you support their efforts to maintain a slavery free supply chain. Encourage your company or your employer to take steps to investigate and eliminate human trafficking throughout its supply chain and to publish the information for consumer awareness. (“20 Ways”)

Organizations, such as the CIW, are also fighting for stricter employment laws on farmworker employers and for an increase in wages (“About CIW”). The CIW arranges protests and writes petitions to bring awareness to their cause and end the slave-like conditions migrant workers experience.

However, there is a lack of discussion in the media and these tomato farm workers are often overlooked. For example, Fred Grimm declares that the Navarrete case in which “employers Cesar and Geovanni Navarrete were sentenced to 12 years each in federal prison on charges of conspiracy, holding workers in involuntary servitude, and peonage,” (“Anti-slavery”) never received coverage on Florida’s major media outlets because “No one really wants to know about the origins of those cheap tomatoes” (Grimm). Eric Schlosser believes that:

Although farmers are often demonized in reports about migrant labor, it's important to point out that they are under tremendous pressure from the leading fast food chains to reduce costs. Food-service companies now purchase the

majority of fresh produce in the United States -- and farmers often believe that cutting wages is necessary to cut prices for their largest customers. Meaningful change, therefore, will have to come from the top. (Schlosser)

He also declares that “The failure of government to protect the weakest and most impoverished workers in the United States has left the job to corporations and consumers” (Schlosser). The Coalition of Immokalee Workers agrees with their method of applying pressure to corporations and other organizations to increase wages of farmworkers and monitor their employers (“About”). The CIW continues to pressure tomato buying companies to force their supplier to increase wages and provide a higher standard of operation.

The best thing for consumers to do at this point is to ask the grocers and restaurants where they purchase tomato products where they get their tomatoes. Grocers such as Whole Foods or King Soopers should know where their specific supply comes from. If they are unsure about the conditions the workers of their supplier are subject to, the consumer could write to a nonprofit organization such as Socially Acceptable Farm Employers (SAFE) that investigates producers. SAFE’s website provides contact information in the form of a phone number as well as a mailing address (SAFE).

On the whole, consumers need to take an interest in where their food is coming from. The food industry has become one of the most corrupt industries in the country. Many forms of food production, not just tomatoes subject workers to decisively horrible conditions. The workers are exploited and cannot defend themselves. Effectively slaves, the workers in Florida’s tomato fields need a voice to improve their lives. If consumers care even slightly about the dignity of their fellow man, they should find out how the food they are eating is conveniently made available to them and fight to combat the misconduct done by employers.

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