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Farmworkers and Students Take On Burger King

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It's tomato season in Immokalee, Florida. Today, like every other day, the tomato pickers will emerge from their trailers in the dark before dawn, and twelve hours later, they will return in the dark of the Florida night.

In the interval, the pickers will be picked up in battered trucks and shipped off to the fields. They will stoop and sweat to fill buckets with tomatoes, thirty-two pounds of them, for forty-five cents a bucket (the same piece rate, in real dollars, as in 1980). They will have to work fast and pick two tons today if they want to take home minimum wage.

The tomatoes will make their way to the growers, then to the vendors, then on to Whoppers and Happy Meals at fast food joints across the country. The money saved by paying poverty wages--or in extreme cases, nothing at all--will find its way into the profit margins of corporations like Burger King.

On November 30, the King's corporate castle was under siege as the tomato pickers, most of them immigrant workers organized through the [Coalition of Immokalee Workers](#) (CIW), surged from the fields of Immokalee into the streets of Miami on a nine-mile march.

Their demands were simple: Pay a penny more per pound. Work with the CIW to end the abuse of workers. Zero tolerance for modern-day slavery in the fields.

And the farm workers weren't alone. Hundreds of students, workers, clergy and allied activists marched with them, as they have since the birth of the Campaign for Fair Food in 2001--to "penny-per-pound" victories at Taco Bell in 2005 and McDonald's last spring.

Marching, dancing, singing, shouting, pushing strollers, banging drums, bearing puppets of "the King" and cut-out buckets of tomatoes and flags inscribed with "Respect" and "Hope," the 1,500-strong pageant against poverty paraded from the offices of BK co-owner Goldman Sachs to the King's own 1 Whopper Way.

There, they delivered hundreds of worn work boots belonging to farmworkers who could not make it out of the fields that day. "Doubt our poverty?" they asked. "Walk in our shoes."

Were BK executives to walk in their shoes, workers say, they would know that a penny more per pound--which would cost the company all of \$250,000 a year--could mean the difference between their families getting fed or going hungry, getting care or going sick. It could mean the difference between the 1980 piece rate and a living wage for 2007, effectively doubling their daily pay,

The workers hold BK responsible for the difference: "Burger King has an active hand in creating these unconscionable conditions," says CIW spokesman Lucas Benitez, "as its enormous purchasing power allows it to demand lower and lower prices, resulting in lower and lower wages." Reports from Florida's growers confirm the corporate connection.

A code of conduct and an independent monitoring system, as the CIW is also demanding, could in turn mean the difference between slavery and freedom for Florida's most exploited workers, over 1,000 of whom have been found held against their will--often at gunpoint--in cases uncovered by the CIW and prosecuted over the last decade.

But instead of working with the CIW, the King has launched a public relations blitz and teamed up with a notorious agribusiness lobby, the [Florida Tomato Growers' Exchange](#), in its own penny-pinching counter-operation.

With BK's backing, the Exchange has set out not only to sabotage the new campaign, but to dismantle the penny-per-pound agreements won by the CIW at Yum! Brands and McDonald's. Calling the demand "pretty much near un-American," the Exchange now threatens \$100,000 fines against growers who pass on the extra penny.

As Lucas Benitez sees it, "Burger King has allied itself with the tomato industry...to push us back, back toward the same abuse and exploitation we have experienced for decades. But we will not be turned back."

Burger King counters that "Florida growers have a right to run their business how they see fit." To some farmworkers, whose own rights don't bear so much as a mention, this statement echoes the words of Florida's slaveholders and sweatshop farmers.

Francisca Cortez, another worker in the CIW, tells the story of two growers who were overheard saying of the tomato pickers, "A tractor can't tell its boss how to run it." As Cortez explains, "They were saying that as if the workers were like tractors. And for us, our response is that we're not tractors, we're human beings who need to be respected, who have rights."

The farmworkers' campaign to be treated like human beings, not tractors, has struck a deep chord among students across the country, who have rallied to the workers' side through the [Student-Farmworker Alliance](#) (SFA). This alliance is flipping the script on corporate Goliaths like the King, combining the power of those who produce the food and those who consume it.

It is here, among its youthful target audience, that Burger King may learn the real price of intransigence, which could amount to much more than a penny per pound. It could cost the King his crown jewel--his brand image for a generation.

"We use our strategic place as the target consumers of these corporations," says SFA organizer Marc Rodrigues, "organizing a coordinated rejection of and protest campaign against the corporations until they agree to the workers' demands."

The recent past is a prologue. Between 2001 and 2005, the Taco Bell boycott led students to "boot the Bell" off dozens of campuses nationwide. Last year's McDonald's campaign sparked student solidarity from Austin to Boston, yielding victory with the threat of a boycott. Last month's "Kingdom Days of Action" saw more than thirty protests ripple across the country in a single week.

On November 30, the march on Burger King reverberated all the way to Wall Street, as student activists dressed as penny-pinching financiers showed up at Goldman Sachs's headquarters in New York City, pointing out that the bonuses of twelve of its executives exceeded \$200 million last year--twice what Florida's 10,000 tomato pickers took home.

Students see a direct connection to their own lives, too. "For students, it's an issue of being cynically targeted and manipulated by this corporation," explains Rodrigues, "trying to buy our loyalty and suck the money out our pockets.... So it's a question of us standing alongside farmworkers and making sure that all of us are having our dignity, rights and lives respected."

The campaign has tapped into a deepening disaffection with corporate power and profit amid poverty. To some, it looks like the new wave of the anti-sweatshop and global justice movements first seen in the 1990s--only the sweatshops are closer to home. To others, it looks like a new labor movement, a new student movement, a new immigrants' movement.

The Campaign for Fair Food is all of these things, and at its core, it is a movement concerning some of the most basic struggles in American life: slavery versus freedom, fast food versus fair food, community versus corporate control, dehumanization versus human dignity.

"As poor people, part of a poor community here in the US, the dignity of our community is the most valuable thing," insists tomato picker Gerardo Reyes. "And we must defend that dignity. We cannot let [corporations like Burger King] step on the most valuable thing for us, our dignity. That's why we must keep on going with the struggle."

Burger King may not want its customers to hear from people like Gerardo Reyes, or see the farmworkers who toil for its tomatoes. But they will not be silent, nor will they be invisible any longer. Young people are listening, and looking, and they've got their own message for the King: We're not having it your way.