

Background on the Campaign for Fair Food And the History of the Taco Bell Boycott

Where we stand today

On March 8, 2005, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers and Taco Bell Corporation reached an historic agreement that both concretely addresses farmworkers' wages and working conditions and is the first step toward moving the fast-food industry toward a new way of doing business that respects human rights.

This historic success would not have been possible without the strong witness of Presbyterians across the country. Many people wrote letters, prayed, fasted, protested, and provided hospitality or material support to the farmworkers as they sought to establish socially responsible purchasing by Taco Bell, a part of Yum! Brands, the largest fast-food company in the world, through support of the Taco Bell boycott. As a result of these efforts Yum! Brands has stepped forward to work together with the farmworkers, not only agreeing to meet every request of the workers but also leading the way toward industry-wide support for socially responsible purchasing. [More on the details of the agreement]

The conditions in the fields...

Right now farmworkers picking tomatoes for Florida-based growers receive 40 – 45 cents for every 32 pound bucket of tomatoes picked and earn around \$7,500 a year according to the Department of Labor. Their wages have remained unchanged for more than 20 years. Furthermore, since 1999 there have been three cases of debt-bondage slavery in the tomato fields that have been prosecuted by the U.S. Department of Justice and for which convictions and prison sentences have been handed down to crew leaders. Two more cases were uncovered in the fall of 2003. In 1996, farmworkers formed the Coalition of Immokalee Workers and engaged in work stoppages, general strikes, hunger strikes and appeals to Florida governmental leaders to address the exploitation in the fields. But there was no significant movement from the growers to raise wages or to dialogue with the workers.

Farmworkers are explicitly excluded from the National Labor Relations Act so growers are under no obligation to dialogue with the workers they employ and the workers have no recourse to the National Labor Relations Board for adjudication of grievances. So as wages continued to be stagnant and as more cases of slavery in the fields were uncovered, the workers asked "who is buying the tomatoes we pick?"

Who is buying the tomatoes the workers pick?

Florida is the largest fresh tomato producing state in the nation with the longest season (about 8.5 months) that includes two harvest cycles. Florida-based growers, who own fields in Florida, up and down the East Coast, on the Pacific coast, and in Puerto Rico, are among the largest and most powerful corporate growers in the country. Over the last thirty years there has been an increased demand by the fast-food industry for year-round, high volume supply of fresh (hand-picked) tomatoes that are used in sandwiches, tacos, salads, and more. Workers knew that these fast-food companies were major buyers of the tomatoes they picked, however, supply chain information on what companies are actually purchasing from which suppliers is confidential information and is not readily available to the public because it is considered competitive information.

In 1999 "The Packer," a grower's journal published an article describing the long-term contractual relationship between Taco Bell and one of the lowest paying growers in Florida, the Six-L's Packing Company. So in 2000 the Coalition of Immokalee Workers sought the help of an important client of Florida growers, Taco Bell. Taco Bell is owned by Yum! Brands, the largest fast-food company in the world, which also owns KFC, Long John Silver's, A and W Restaurants and Pizza Hut. Taco Bell benefited from the collective purchasing power of Yum! Brands companies which exerts downward pressure on workers' wages through its enormous demand for cheap tomatoes. When Taco Bell did not respond to multiple letters and phone calls requesting that they address exploitation among their tomato suppliers, the workers called for a consumer boycott of Taco Bell in 2001. Boycott supporters asked Taco Bell to:

- ◆ participate in three-way talks between the company, its tomato suppliers, and representatives of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers,
- ◆ contribute to an immediate increase in farm worker wages through a penny more per pound increase in the rate Taco Bell pays for its tomatoes and require its suppliers to pass this increase along to the workers, and
- ◆ work with Taco Bell's tomato suppliers and the Coalition of Immokalee Workers to strengthen the company's code of conduct to include core labor rights and independent monitoring.

After much study and prayer, this consumer boycott was endorsed by many national religious bodies including the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the United Methodist Church, United Church of Christ, the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the American Friends Service Committee, Alliance of Baptists, Pax Christi International and US affiliates, and the National Council of Churches of Christ in the (U.S.A.) whose membership comprises 36 Protestant and Orthodox communions whose constituent membership represents over 50 million Christians in the United States. The boycott was endorsed by Bishop John J. Nevins of the Diocese of Venice in Florida. The National Farm Worker Ministry, the Episcopal Migrant Ministry, Agricultural Missions as well as regional and local bodies also endorsed the boycott.

In March of 2005, Yum! Brands, Taco Bell's parent company agreed to all of the workers demands. In addition the company agreed to help the CIW spread this new model of socially responsible purchasing throughout the fast-food industry and also fund a lobbyist to work with the CIW to change Florida labor laws. Taco Bell made the decision to lead the fast-food industry by example and is the first restaurant chain in history to work with farmworkers to address human rights abuses in their supply chain and to concretely remedy the enormous downward pressure the company's purchasing power has on workers' wages through the "penny-per-pound pass through." This means that workers picking for Florida suppliers of Taco Bell will have their wages increased from 40-45 cents per 32 pound bucket to 72 to 77 cents per bucket. Taco Bell has shown that socially responsible purchasing can be done. Now it's up to all of us to ensure that this agreement is the cornerstone for a new way of doing business, industry-wide.

Transforming Fast-food into Fair Food

The corporate giants who are end-buyers of the tomatoes picked by the workers exert downward pressure on the wages of workers. Because of this, fast-food companies who are profiting from the exploitation of farmworkers in their supply chain have a moral and ethical responsibility to end that exploitation – just as Taco Bell has agreed to do.

A study released by Oxfam America in March 2004, "Like Machines in the Fields: Workers without Rights in American Agriculture," goes into even more detail on the power that corporate giants like Yum, McDonalds, and others hold over the agricultural industry (www.oxfamamerica.org/pdfs/labor_report_04.pdf). The study cites a significant shift in an important economic indicator, known as the "Marketing Spread" (the disparity between the price a consumer pays for a product and the price received by the grower), as concrete evidence of the growing power of major corporate buyers over prices at the farm level. "Whereas in 1990 grower-shippers received 41% of the retail price of tomatoes, by 2000 they were receiving barely one quarter (25%)" (page 35).

In short, major corporate buyers -- companies like WalMart, McDonald's, and Yum, whose sheer economic muscle is unprecedented -- have increasingly used their buying power to drive down their costs, squeezing their suppliers for the deepest possible discounts on produce. In turn, growers have sought to maintain their margins by squeezing their suppliers, and in particular the one supplier with the least power to negotiate its price, labor. While growers cannot demand cheaper tractors from John Deere, cheaper chemicals from Monsanto, or a break on the interest rate from their bank, they can hold wages stagnant, or even cut the piece rate, and still obtain desperately poor workers to pick their crops. The Oxfam study concludes: "Squeezed by the buyers of their produce, growers pass on the costs and risks imposed on them to those on the lowest rung of the supply chain: the farmworkers they employ" (page 36).

The ongoing Campaign for Fair Food seeks to use the CIW-Taco Bell agreement as a model for bringing socially responsible purchasing to the entire fast-food industry.

How has the Presbyterian Church been involved?

Local congregations and presbyteries in Florida have been ministering to the needs of farmworkers for many years through donations of clothing, food, shared prayer and by supporting Immokalee based service organizations that seek to ameliorate education, health and housing needs. Realizing that such charitable ministry was essential but would not eliminate the poverty or exploitation faced by the workers, local Presbyterians encouraged the CIW to apply for a Self Development of People grant. The CIW received the grant which helped them coordinate worker campaigns and start a co-op which provides basic foodstuffs at discounted prices to workers. As Florida clergy and members accompanied the workers through the hunger strikes, marches and work stoppages mentioned above, they and the workers grew to believe that significant change could realistically be achieved by approaching the problem from the top of the agri-food industry chain – with the grower’s clients who profited from worker exploitation in the form of low-cost tomatoes. After the workers called for a consumer boycott of Taco Bell, the Tampa Bay Presbytery brought an overture in support of the boycott to the 214th General Assembly.

After study, reflection and prayer General Assembly endorsed the consumer boycott of Taco Bell in June 2002 and hired the Rev. Noelle Damico, a United Church of Christ minister as the National Coordinator of the Boycott for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Congregations observed the boycott, held educational forums and letter-writing campaigns, supported the CIW on its many “Taco Bell Truth Tours” and participated in public actions to draw attention to these issues. Through the leadership of the PC(USA) other religious communities and the National Council of Churches learned about the workers’ conditions and joined the boycott.

Because of the strength of the church’s participation in the boycott, the PC(USA) was able to open dialogue between top Yum! Brands executives and members of the CIW. These initial talks in May of 2003 and another round of talks that were convened by the PC(USA) and held at the Carter Center during the spring of 2004 paved the way for the dialogue this year that issued in this landmark agreement. Meanwhile Presbyterian members, congregations, presbyteries and synods continued to observe the boycott, spread the word and insist that businesses can and should operate in ways that promote human well-being. Together with the Coalition of Immokalee Workers we called upon Yum! Brands to “lead by example” and we celebrate that Yum and Taco Bell have taken up that challenge and promise.

Together We Have Made History: Now Let’s Make the Future

The agreement between the CIW and Taco Bell marks the first time in history that a fast-food company has taken responsibility for the condition of workers in their supply chain and concretely acted to remedy known exploitation. Further, this is the first time in history that farmworkers and the largest fast-food company in the world, Yum! Brands, will work together in an innovative partnership to bring about changes industry-wide. This landmark agreement is the first step toward transforming the fast-food industry. Through our collective efforts we have made history. Now let’s make the future. [More on what you can do!]

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www.pcusa.org/fairfood