

Farmworkers, Low-Wage Jobs, and Living into a New Economy

Reading the Signs of the Times

Tomato pickers toil long days for 45 cents per 32-pound bucket of tomatoes, earning an average of \$10,000 a year according to the U.S. Department of Labor. Migrant workers face very similar conditions in Canada. Over half of farmworkers live in poverty. In the United States, they have no right to overtime pay, no health insurance, no sick leave, no paid vacation, and no right to organize a union to improve these conditions. In the most extreme cases, workers are held against their will and forced to work as modern-day slaves.

Faced with exploitative wages and very harsh working conditions, members of this predominantly immigrant workforce based in Immokalee, Florida, have organized themselves into an organization called the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW). The CIW forged alliances with religious, student, and human rights communities who represent millions of consumers across the country. This coalition, the Campaign for Fair Food, has won agreements between the CIW and the three largest fast-food corporations in the world: Yum! Brands (Taco Bell, Pizza Hut, KFC and others), McDonald, and Burger King. The results have been higher pay and improved conditions for the farmworkers harvesting the tomatoes that will eventually be sold to huge corporate firms. They are pressuring these large corporations to enact industry-wide, socially responsible purchasing practices to uphold human rights for farmworkers. In addition, the CIW has worked with the U.S. Department of Justice and the FBI to investigate and successfully prosecute six cases of slavery in recent years, freeing more than 1,000 people. The question is not “if” they will succeed, it is only a matter of “when.”

In June 2003 Lucas Benitez, co-founder of the CIW, testified before the U.S. Congress:

My name is Lucas Benitez. I left Mexico at 17, driven by the poverty that faces thousands of Mexicans. Although we work hard, work in our own fields no longer provides enough for food or clothing. My father is a peasant who always worked the land, growing corn (maize). But he had to stop because it is a crop that is no longer profitable and it was impossible to support a family on its harvest....Thousands of us who find ourselves in Florida have been obligated to leave our countries because of the consequences of the free trade agreements that have flooded our countries' markets with cheap agricultural products from the United States and Canada, making it impossible for us to sell the crops that we have grown for generations.... We who once grew our own food are now simply peons working for the huge multinational agribusinesses that are taking over and monopolizing the international agricultural market.

Many farmworkers in the United States and Canada face abusive conditions in the farms and fields. But for many this current reality was not the beginning of their difficulties. As Benitez describes, many farmworkers were forced to leave their homeland in Latin America due to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) between Mexico, Canada, and the United States. In addition to working long hours at hard labor, farmworkers have organized

peaceful, mass protests to express their opposition to NAFTA and the international trade agreements which devastated their families and livelihoods and, in many cases, forced them to come to Canada and the U.S. looking for work.

View the Video “The Battle Fields” (28 minutes)

<http://vidego.multicastmedia.com/player.php?v=s6mf04f0>

Discussion questions:

1. Are there rights that every worker should have? What are they?
2. What should determine a worker’s pay and benefits?
3. What responsibilities do large companies have regarding their suppliers? What oversight should these firms provide for the workers employed by their suppliers?
4. Should workers who lack authorization to work in the U.S. or Canada receive the same pay, benefits, and working conditions as authorized workers?
5. Should poor workers in the United States and Canada be appreciative of any job they can get? Or should these workers have a right to a decent wage, benefits, and fair treatment?
6. What responsibility or obligation does a consumer have for the conditions in which a product is produced?

Confessing Our Faith

Isaiah 65:17–23 (NRSV)

For I am about to create new heavens and a new Earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight; I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress. No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime; for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth, and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed. They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.

Reflection

Isaiah envisioned an alternative to the destructive warfare and violent empire of his day. But his vision also speaks to us in the 21st century. Isaiah’s vivid description of God’s reign of righteousness provides a powerful contrast to the economic violence and destruction that exists in our world.

Farmworkers—those who plant—often don’t eat. They can’t afford sufficient food. And those who build don’t always inhabit. Immigrant construction workers are sometimes paid so little that they cannot afford decent housing. And many workers of all types suffer untold indignities and abuses in their workplaces.

All workers are children of God, made in the image of God. All workers have dignity and value. All work that makes a contribution to the community has dignity and is not degrading. But many *jobs* are degraded.

A degraded job is one that pays too little or is potentially unsafe. It is a job in which the worker is treated unfairly or illegally, or in which the employer discriminates in hiring or promotions. A degraded job is one in which a worker has too little autonomy or control over her work, resulting in high levels of stress and even physical illness.

Most countries, even the poorest, have labor protections that, on paper, are quite good. However, too often they are not enforced.

But workers need jobs, even bad jobs if that is all they can get. But these degraded jobs must be improved. People of faith must stand with workers seeking dignity and fair treatment. God's reign does not stop at the door to the workplace.

People of faith accompany their sisters and brothers through the valleys of life, wherever these lie. We support the Florida farmworkers as they join together in the Coalition of Immokalee Workers to address their workplace injustices. This is an important way that workers who plant may also afford to eat, and workers who build may also afford decent housing.

Bible study questions:

1. Describe Isaiah's vision of the "new Earth." In what ways does it differ from life today?
2. Can you think of situations today in the United States, Canada, or around the world where someone builds a house and someone else, unjustly, inhabits it? Where someone plants a vineyard and someone else, unjustly, eats its fruit? In what ways do people today *not* enjoy the work of their hands?
3. Thinking of Isaiah's day (sometime before 520 B.C.E., shortly after Israelites returned after the Babylonian exile), what would have been reasons for an infant to live just a few days or for adults to die prematurely? Why does this happen today—in Canada, the United States, the larger world?

Covenanting for Justice

There are many ways that people of faith can support the struggles of workers for greater dignity, higher pay and benefits, and better working conditions. The website of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (<http://www.ciw-online.org>) provides updates on ways to support the Campaign for Fair Food and their efforts in the fast-food industry.

In the U.S., the National Farmworker Ministry (<http://www.nfwm.org/>) is an ecumenical organization active in the faith community to support farmworker organizing and improve the lives of these workers. Workers in other industries are also seeking to improve their work lives. There are two major national networks of labor-religious coalitions: Interfaith Worker Justice (<http://www.iwj.org/>) and Jobs with Justice (<http://www.jwj.org/>). Both of these organizations support a network of local coalitions involving people of faith and labor organizations that educate, organize and mobilize the religious community on issues and campaigns that will improve wages, benefits and conditions for workers, especially low-wage workers. Go to <http://www.iwj.org/outreach/lg.html> (for IWJ) and to <http://www.iwj.org/outreach/lg.html> (for JwJ) to see the over 50 cities and localities with a religious-labor coalition.

In Canada, Kairos: Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives is the primary organization through which churches in Canada work ecumenically on these issues. The web site has good information and resources. <http://www.kairoscanada.org/e/refugees/migrants/index.asp>

Closing Litany

Excerpted from the Accra Confession: Covenanting for Justice in the Economy and the Earth

We believe that any economy of the household of life, given to us by God's covenant to sustain life, is accountable to God. We believe the economy exists to serve the dignity and well-being of people in community, within the bounds of the sustainability of creation. We believe that human beings are called to choose God over Mammon and that confessing our faith is an act of obedience.

Therefore we reject the unregulated accumulation of wealth and limitless growth that has already cost the lives of millions and destroyed much of God's creation.

We believe that God is a God of justice. In a world of corruption, exploitation, and greed, God is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor, the exploited, the wronged, and the abused (Psalm 146:7-9). God calls for just relationships with all creation.

Therefore we reject any ideology or economic regime that puts profits before people, does not care for all creation, and privatizes those gifts of God meant for all. We reject any teaching that justifies those who support, or fail to resist, such an ideology in the name of the gospel.

By confessing our faith together, we covenant in obedience to God's will as an act of faithfulness in mutual solidarity and in accountable relationships. This binds us together to work for justice in

the economy and the Earth both in our common global context as well as our various regional and local settings.

Prayer

Abba, Father, I thank you for the many blessings you have bestowed upon me. Father, you see all that is happening in this world. You see the injustice that we, the field workers, go through when people are being penalized for not producing at a certain rate per hour, even when we are working as hard as we can.

Your Word, O God, tells me you hear our cries. God, help us to reflect on our lives, that we would not become like the people who cheat us of our pay. Breathe into our hearts a love and passion for you, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in the name of Jesus. Amen.

—A prayer written by a farmworker, preserved in the National Farmworker Ministry's "Harvest of Justice" brochure, 2007

Additional Resources

- Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) is a community-based worker organization composed of Latinos, Haitians, and Mayan Indian immigrants working in low-wage jobs throughout the state of Florida. www.ciw-online.org
- More information from Public Broadcasting Corporation's NOW program on farmworkers and the CIW. www.pbs.org/now/society/ciw.html

In Canada:

- Justicia for Migrant Workers (includes links to other organizations including faith based) www.justicia4migrantworkers.org
- Agriculture Workers Alliance awa-ata.ca/en is affiliated with the United Food and Commercial Workers (Canada). The website has links to excellent resources and organizations including films about farmworkers in Canada. awa-ata.ca/en/resources-for-agriculture-workers-and-others/movies-about-farm-workers-in-canada
- Enlace, based in Ontario, works with migrant workers and newly arrived immigrants. (Spanish only). enlace.ca
- In June 2008 the CBC covered the news of the first collective agreement signed with migrant workers in Canada, in Portage la Prairie, Manitoba. www.cbc.ca/canada/manitoba/story/2008/06/25/farm-union.html

In the United States:

- National Farmworker Ministry is an interfaith organization supporting farmworkers as they organize for justice; its member organizations include nearly 40 national, state and local religious bodies. www.nfwm.org
- Student Action with Farmworkers brings students and farmworkers together to learn about each other's lives, share resources and skills, improve conditions for farmworkers, and build

diverse coalitions working for social change. SAF works with farmworkers to address their concerns through documentation of human rights violations, grassroots education and mobilization, leadership development of young people, policy advocacy, and support of labor organizing. saf-unite.org

- Student Farmworker Alliance is a national network of students and youth organizing with farmworkers to eliminate sweatshop conditions and modern-day slavery in the fields. www.sfalliance.org
- Farmworker Justice seeks to empower farmworkers to improve their living and working conditions, immigration status, health, occupational safety, and access to justice by engaging in litigation, administrative and legislative advocacy, training and technical assistance, coalition-building, public education, and support for union organizing. www.fwjjustice.org