

You Need to Know: The Slavery Conditions on Tomato Farms

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Farmworkers, students, and activists march to the corporate offices of Taco Bell March 11, 2002 in Irvine, CA, calling attention to the working conditions of Florida farm laborers who harvest tomatoes for the fast-Mexican food chain. The protesters are calling for a boycott to help pressure Floridas growers to improve the pay and conditions of workers, who they say earn about \$7,500 a year. (Photo by David McNew/Getty Images)

We think of slavery as something abolished sometime around the end of the Civil War, but it's not as simple as that. Thousands of farm laborers work under slavery-like conditions today in the U.S. and Mexico to grow tomatoes and other produce. This January, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) was presented with the 2014 Presidential Medal for Extraordinary Efforts to Combat Human Trafficking. After a 20-year battle against slave-like working conditions of American tomato farmers, a group of coalition workers was recognized by Secretary of State John Kerry during a ceremony during the White House's annual Forum on Human Trafficking.

Immoka-who?

The Coalition of Immokalee Workers is a not-for-profit based in Immokalee, Florida. The coalition is made up of tomato farmers who are working toward safe and fair working conditions for all workers in Florida's agricultural industry.

Why do tomato farmers need a coalition?

Immokalee was once home to some of the most brutal atrocities against human rights in the United States. The region is where one-third of all U.S. tomatoes are grown. Florida as a whole produces 90 percent of our winter tomatoes. And since 1997, the Justice Department has prosecuted seven slavery cases in Florida, four involving tomato harvesters.

Wait, slave tomato farmers?

Yes. More than 1,200 people have been freed from agricultural slavery rings in Florida during the last 10 to 15 years. Workers tell stories of brutal beatings, being shackled in chains at night, no regular pay for work, housing where 20 pickers share one mobile home and are each charged upwards of \$200 per month in rent. Yes, per person. No shade in the fields, no breaks for meals, 10 to 12 hour workdays, seven days a week. With financial obligations and no way to escape, many tomato field workers have found themselves modern day slaves.

Whoa. So the CIW is working to end this?

Yep. For the last 20 years, the CIW has been working to abolish slavery and fight for fair wages and treatment for all agricultural workers. The CIW has implemented a Fair Food Program that engages several of the top tomato buyers in the U.S. — including Wal-Mart, Whole Foods and Fresh Market — sometimes going so far as to hold marches or boycotts to sway major tomato retailers. All companies that comply with the Fair Food Program are committed to only buy tomatoes from growers who agree with the CIW code of conduct, ensuring higher wages for workers, basic education, tents for shade and time to eat. The well-being of farmers is monitored by the Fair

Food Standards Council, which investigates charges of sexual misconduct, wage disputes and code violations. Growers who are found in violation are cut from the program, keeping them from selling to Fair Food Program participants, like Subway, McDonald's, Burger King, Trader Joe's and Chipotle.

How are higher wages achieved?

Through a penny-a-pound premium pledge. Tomato pickers earn less than two cents for every pound of tomatoes they pick (which we buy for \$1 to \$4 per pound in the grocery store). The "penny-per-pound" pledge provides an extra penny per pound, which goes directly to the tomato pickers. "The extra penny a pound means that participating companies together pay an additional \$4 million a year for tomatoes," reports the *New York Times*. This translates into an extra \$60 to \$80 a week for tomato pickers, or a 20-to-35 percent weekly pay increase.

So, has tomato farm slavery been eradicated?

Unfortunately, no. Last year, the *Los Angeles Times* published a four-part series documenting the slave-like conditions of tomato farmers in Mexico. Children and adults work six days a week for sometimes less than \$10 weekly pay. They are trapped in rat-infested housing, denied pay, go unfed and are severely punished for attempts at escape. Worst of all, some of the same businesses that comply with the Fair Food Program also buy from these farms in Mexico.

How widespread is agricultural slavery?

It's hard to tell; no one truly knows the extent. It could be worse than we think, or a case of one or a few situations being described as the norm.

What's being done to end it?

In 2013, a handful of pickers were able to escape from one of the largest tomato farms in Mexico. Their escape led to the liberation of nearly 300

workers. But unfortunately, there is nothing like CIW in Mexico, and slavery is likely still rampant.

What can I do to manage the slavery footprint of the produce I buy?

The Fair Food Program has a new label that you can look for at participating buyers. You can also join a local Fair Food Group. To learn more about the plight of tomato farmers, check out the film *Food Chains* and the book *Tomatoland* by Barry Estabrooks.

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