

About the CIW



Consciousness + Commitment = Change: How and why we are organizing

The CIW is a community-based organization of mainly Latino, Mayan Indian and Haitian immigrants working in low-wage jobs throughout the state of Florida. We strive 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.

From this basis we fight for, among other things: a fair wage for the work we do, more respect on the part of our bosses and the industries where we work, better and cheaper housing, stronger laws and stronger enforcement against those who would violate workers' rights, the right to organize on our jobs without fear of retaliation, and an end to forced labor in the fields.

From the people, for the people: Who we are

Southwest Florida is the state's most important center for agricultural production, and Immokalee is the state's largest farmworker community. As such, the majority of our approximately 4,000 members work for large agricultural corporations in the tomato and citrus harvests, traveling along the entire East Coast following the harvest in season. Many also move out of agriculture and into other low wage industries that are important in our area, including the construction, nursery, and tourist industries.

We are all leaders: Our history

We began organizing in 1993 as a small group of workers meeting weekly in a room borrowed from a local church to discuss how to better our community and our lives. In a relatively short time we have managed to bring about significant, concrete change.

Combining three community-wide work stoppages with intense public pressure – including an unprecedented month-long hunger strike by six of our members in 1998 and an historic 234-mile march from Ft. Myers to Orlando in 2000 – our early organizing ended over twenty years of declining wages in the tomato industry. By 1998, we had won industry-wide raises of 13-25% (translating into several million dollars annually for the community in increased wages) and a new-found political and social respect from the outside world.

Those raises brought the tomato picking piece-rate back to

pre-1980 levels (the piece-rate had fallen below those levels over the course of the intervening two decades), but wages remained below poverty level and continuing improvement was slow in coming. At the same time, the phenomenon of modern-day slavery was establishing a foothold in Florida's fields.

Anti-Slavery Campaign

While continuing to organize for fairer wages, we also turned our attention to attacking involuntary servitude in our state. Our Anti-Slavery Campaign has earned national and international recognition, based on its innovative program of worker-led investigation and human rights education, and a track record of real success. Our latest victory against indentured servitude came in December of 2008, when employers César and Geovanni Navarrete were sentenced to 12 years each in federal prison for their part in what US Attorney Doug Molloy called "slavery, plain and simple." Since 1997, a total of nine such slavery operations in Florida have been prosecuted. The CIW has been involved in the discovery, investigation, and prosecution of seven of those operations, helping to liberate a total of well over 1,000 workers.

The CIW is a co-founder of the national Freedom Network USA to Empower Enslaved and Trafficked Persons. We are also co-founders and Southeastern US Regional Coordinator for the Freedom Network Training Institute, conducting trainings for law enforcement and social service personnel in how to identify and assist slavery victims, as well as advocating for the full prosecution of all traffickers, including corporations and their sub-contractors. At the state level, we are members of the US Attorney's Anti-Trafficking Task Forces for Tampa and Miami, as well as Florida State University's statewide Working Group against Human Trafficking through its Center for the Advancement of Human Rights. In June 2010, CIW's Anti-Slavery Campaign Coordinator Laura Germino was recognized as a Hero Acting to End Modern-Day Slavery by the US Department of State for "determination to eliminate forced labor in supply chains" – the first time that the recognition was awarded to a US citizen.

The Campaign for Fair Food

In 2001, we turned a new page in our organizing, launching the first-ever farmworker boycott of a major fast-food company – the national boycott of Taco Bell – calling on the fast-food giant to take responsibility for human rights abuses in the fields where its produce is grown and picked. The corporate food industry as a whole – including corporations such as Ahold USA, Kroger, Publix,

Trader Joe's and Wal-Mart – purchases a tremendous volume of fruits and vegetables, leveraging its buying power to demand the lowest possible prices from its suppliers, in turn exerting a powerful downward pressure on wages and working conditions in these suppliers' operations.

Over its four years, the Taco Bell boycott gained broad student, religious, labor, and community support, including the establishment of boycott committees in nearly all 50 states and a fast-growing movement to "Boot the Bell" from college and high school campuses across the country. Large scale national actions also helped move the boycott forward.

In March 2005, amidst this growing pressure, Taco Bell agreed to meet all of our demands to improve wages and working conditions for Florida tomato pickers in its supply chain. The boycott victory was widely celebrated by observers including the 21 members of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, who said of the accord, "This is a truly historic agreement, marking perhaps the single greatest advance for farm workers since the early struggles of the United Farm Workers. To the workers and organizers of CIW, we express our deepest gratitude for their determined work for their own dignity and their historic contribution to advancing the cause of labor rights."

Following the successful conclusion of the Taco Bell boycott, the national network of allies that had helped carry that campaign to victory consolidated to form the Alliance for Fair Food, signaling the corporate food industry that the Campaign for Fair Food would not stop at Taco Bell. The AFF has become a powerful new voice for the respect of human rights in this country's food industry and for an end to the relentless exploitation of Florida's farmworkers.

In April of 2007 – in the culmination of a two-year battle with the largest restaurant chain in the world, McDonald's – the Campaign for Fair Food took an important new step forward. With an announcement at the Carter Center in Atlanta, McDonald's and the CIW reached a landmark accord that not only met the standards set in the Taco Bell agreement, but also committed the fast-food leader to collaborate with the CIW in developing an industry-wide third party mechanism for monitoring conditions in the fields and investigating abuses.

Following a persistent, year-long campaign, Burger King became the third fast food giant to agree to work with the CIW. Later that year, the campaign broke new ground with its first agreement in the supermarket industry when leading organic foods retailer Whole Foods agreed to do the same. By the end of 2008, Subway, the largest fast food purchaser of Florida tomatoes, had also come to the table.

We then turned our focus to the food service provider industry, and

agreements with Bon Appétit Management Co., Compass Group, Aramark and Sodexo followed in 2009-2010.

Immokalee Today: Nothing is Impossible...

In late 2010, we signed an agreement with the Florida Tomato Growers Exchange to extend the CIW's Fair Food principles – including a strict code of conduct, a cooperative complaint resolution system, a participatory health and safety program, and a worker-to-worker education process – to over 90% of the Florida tomato industry. This watershed moment ended a 15-year impasse and followed the establishment, just weeks earlier, of two direct agreements between the CIW and two of the largest growers in the industry, Pacific and Six L's.

As a result of these agreements, we are on the cusp today of an unprecedented transformation of farm labor conditions in Florida's tomato fields, but the pace, depth and breadth of that transformation will ultimately depend on the participation of all the major purchasers of Florida's tomatoes.

Despite widespread support for the innovative, collaborative solution at the heart of the Campaign for Fair Food, the supermarket industry (with the lone exception of Whole Foods) has yet to do its part, and is thus the only remaining obstacle in the way of long-awaited, urgent change in the fields.

Over the past several years, through the Campaign for Fair Food and our anti-slavery work, Immokalee has evolved from being one of the poorest, most politically powerless communities in the country to become today an important public presence with forceful, committed leadership directly from the base of our community – young, migrant workers forging a future of livable wages and modern labor relations in Florida's fields.

In recognition of their work, three CIW members were presented the prestigious Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Award, the first and only time the award had gone to a US-based organization. In recent years, the CIW and the Campaign for Fair Food have also been recognized as 2010 "People of the Year" by the Ft. Myers (FL) News-Press and by the 2009 Salem Award for Human Rights and Social Justice; the 2008 Sister Margaret Cafferty Development of People Award by the Catholic Campaign for Human Development; the 2007 Anti-Slavery Award by Anti-Slavery International (the oldest international human rights organization in the world); World Hunger Year's 2006 Harry Chapin Self-Reliance Award; the Freedom Network's 2006 Wellstone Award; and the Business Ethics Network's 2005 BENNY Award.

