

Dear Publix Manager:

As a Publix customer, I am writing to urge Publix to work with the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) and the Florida tomato industry to address the sub-poverty wages and human rights abuses historically faced by farmworkers who pick your tomatoes.

The CIW is an internationally-recognized, award-winning farmworker organization based in Immokalee, Florida. It is spearheading an innovative effort to promote principles and practices of socially responsible purchasing in the retail food industry that advance and ensure the human rights of farmworkers.

There is a well-documented human rights crisis in Florida's fields, and conditions facing farmworkers who harvest your company's tomatoes are as urgent as they are appalling. Tomato harvesters are still paid by the piece. The average piece rate today is 50 cents for each 32-lbs. bucket of tomatoes picked, a rate that has changed little since 1980. As a result of that stagnation, a worker today must pick more than 2.25 tons of tomatoes to earn minimum wage in a typical 10-hour workday.

In the most extreme conditions, farmworkers have been held against their will and forced to work for little or no pay, facing conditions that meet the stringent legal standards for prosecution under modern-day slavery statutes. The CIW has assisted Federal Civil Rights officials in successfully prosecuting six slavery operations involving over 1,000 workers in Florida's fields since 1997, prompting one federal prosecutor to call Florida "ground zero for modern-day slavery." Since 1997, a total of nine such slavery operations have been prosecuted.

These conditions - and more, including widespread sexual harassment and wage theft - are the "atrocities" to which Publix spokesperson Dwaine Stevens referred in an unbelievable December 2010 statement to the press: "If there are some atrocities going on, it's not our business."

Rather than ignore the unacceptable exploitation that still exists in Florida agriculture, I urge Publix to actively join in ensuring fair wages and conditions for those who pick Publix' tomatoes. Today the members of the Florida Tomato Growers exchange - representing 90% of Florida's tomato growers - are implementing the CIW's Fair Food program, along with nine retail food industry leaders including Whole Foods, McDonald's and Subway. Under the program, those retailers require more humane labor standards from their Florida tomato suppliers and pay a price premium for those more fairly produced tomatoes. They also buy only from growers who meet those high standards.

It is imperative that Publix seize the opportunity to be part of the solution to Florida's longstanding history of farmworker exploitation. At the table is a proven model, backed by the expertise of the CIW and the tomato industry itself, and a tremendous opportunity for Publix to join other major food retailers in advancing the principles of Fair Food.

Publix founder George Jenkins used to say, "Don't let making a profit get in the way of doing the right thing." As a Publix customer, I look forward to your company honoring his principle by working with the CIW and Florida's tomato growers to ensure human rights and fair wages for the farmworkers who harvest the tomatoes sold in your stores.

Your leadership is necessary to sustain this new, cooperative effort to end Florida's agricultural human rights crisis once and for all.

For more information, please contact the Coalition of Immokalee Workers at 239-657-8311 or workers@ciw-online.org.

Thank you,

