After Long Fight, Farmworkers In Florida Win an Increase in Pay

**BY KRISTOFER RÍOS**

IMMOKALEE, Fla. — After fighting for more than a decade for better wages, a group of Florida farmworkers has hatched out the final piece of an extraordinary agreement with local tomato growers and several big-name buyers, including the fast-food giants McDonald’s and Burger King, that will pay the pickers a penny more for every pound of fruit they harvest.

Farm laborers are among the lowest-paid workers in the United States, and the agreement could add thousands of dollars to their income.

Though the hamburger chains and others agreed to the increment last year, the money they have been paying — an estimated $2 million now held in an escrow account — could not be distributed to tomato pickers until the state’s largest trade association, which acts as a middleman, agreed to lift a ban preventing their farms from passing along the extra wages.

That happened in November, when the farmworkers’ group, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, and the Florida Tomato Growers Exchange, a trade association, completed details of a code of conduct that included not only the wage improvement but also guarantees of increased workplace protections — like minimum-wage guarantees and a zero tolerance policy on forced and child labor — for the laborers.

Some labor experts said the agreement could set a precedent for improving working conditions and pay in other parts of the agriculture and food industries, nationally and worldwide.

“This can and will be extended to other areas of the agricultural industry,” said Chris Tilly, director of the U.C.L.A. Institute for Research on Labor and Employment, who said this type of agreement was uncommon. “There are potentially interesting implications for supply chains that reach outside this country.”

Tomatoes are a $1.3 billion industry in the United States, and Florida farmers lead the nation, producing $220 million worth of the crop, followed by California. Workers earn, on average, an estimated $10,000 to $12,000 a year. The new agreement could increase earnings to about $17,000 if new buyers come to the table.

At least nine major buyers — including the Whole Foods Market supermarket chain, as well as McDonald’s and Burger King — have been paying the penny-per-pound price increase. Still, some in the industry worry the unusual agreement could be undermined.

Carolina Hidalgo contributed reporting.

“People are concerned about this being a one-year agreement,” said Ramon Padilla, an attorney who represents the Coalition of Immokalee Workers.

The agreement is only valid for this year, but the workers involved are hopeful it will last longer.

“In the past, the companies would shift blame to the contractors and wipe their hands clean of any complaints of abuse,” Mr. Salucio said. “With these agreements, the growers have to work with us, and the workers can report abuses without fearing reprisals.”

Immokalee, about 30 miles southeast of Fort Myers, has been drawing workers, many of them from Latin America, since the 1990s. The workers gather nearly every morning before dawn in a dusty parking lot in front of the La Fien-

A market in Immokalee, a town that has long been home to many of the state’s 33,000 tomato pickers.
One Penny More a Pound

Fair trade is finally coming to the tomato fields of Florida, where farmworkers have won a remarkable victory in a 15-year struggle for better pay and working conditions. Last month, they struck a deal with growers to raise workers' pay and to create an industry code of conduct, a health and safety program and a system to resolve worker complaints.

The agreement arose from a campaign organized by the Coalition of Immokalee Workers. The workers, mainly from Central America, Mexico and Haiti, were asking for a modest penny more per pound of tomatoes picked. Growers insisted they could not afford it.

The coalition tried the usual tactics — hunger strikes, marches, boycotts directed at the growers. But they also pressed major tomato buyers to pay for the raises themselves, by accepting a penny-per-pound surcharge on their purchases. That worked, first with Taco Bell, then McDonald's, then a long list of other companies in the fast-food and food-service industries.

The Florida Tomato Growers Exchange, which represents 90 percent of the state's tomato growers, still fought back, threatening huge fines against members who participated. The extra pay sat in escrow.

Then, in October, a family-owned producer, Pacific Tomato Growers, sided with the pickers. In November, the exchange relented. The supermarket chains — except for Whole Foods — are still refusing to participate.

For workers who lug two tons or more of tomatoes a day, a penny raise might bring a $10,000 yearly income to $17,000. A raise from abject to survivable poverty for 30,000 tomato pickers is a victory to welcome, but not rest upon.

Workers in Immokalee have defended their rights, but America's fields are still too often open-air sweatshops. Farmworkers lack federal labor protections like overtime pay and the right to organize. Most states do no better. A bill to expand farmworkers' rights languishes in Albany. The Immokalee victory won't impose fairness overnight, but after generations of exploitation, part of the farm industry is pointing in the right direction.