

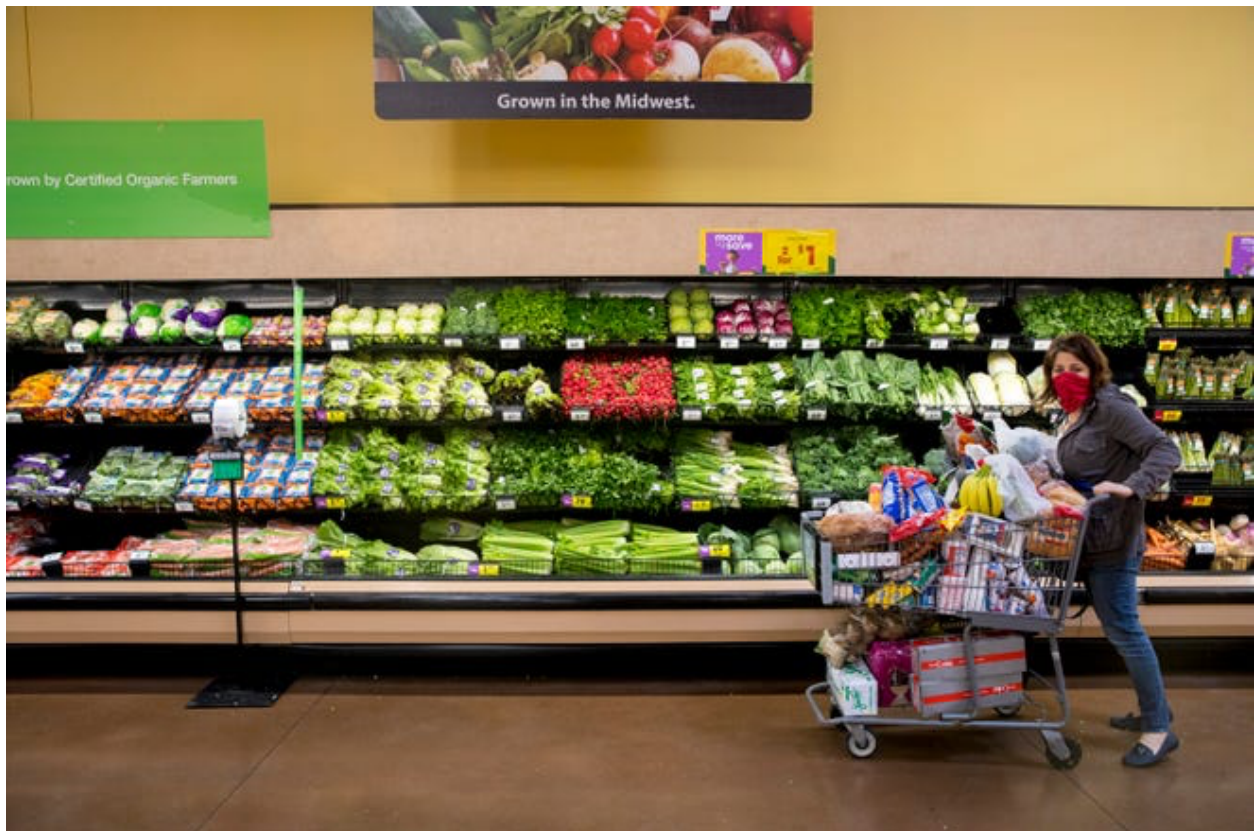
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Kroger silent on human rights abuses in its supply chain | Opinion

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The competitive prices Kroger offers its customers can sometimes come at a terrible human cost – and it may soon get much worse.

Earlier this year, the U.S. Department of Labor publicly outed Kroger as a buyer of watermelons harvested by workers trapped in a forced labor ring. In this multi-state forced labor conspiracy, farm bosses associated with Los Villatoros Harvesting held dozens of workers in debt bondage, kept them in crowded, decrepit housing, and threatened them with deportation – or worse – if they spoke out against their abuse. One worker later told prosecutors, "All this time, I could not return to Mexico for fear that something would happen to me. That the Villatoros had paid someone to kill me."

Their suffering was brought to light when two of the workers escaped from a forced labor camp in Pahokee, Florida by hiding in the trunk of a car and calling our organization, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, for help. Though the abusive crew leaders of Los Villatoros Harvesting have since been convicted and sentenced – and a federal law enforcement agency directly connected those watermelons with Kroger's produce aisle – Kroger never so much as issued a statement about the produce on its shelves made with forced labor, despite growing alarm from farmworkers, human rights leaders and journalists.

To make matters worse, this is not the first but the second time in the past two years that Kroger has been named in connection with forced labor abuses. Tainted with forced labor in its supply chain twice in two years, Kroger's record of social irresponsibility defies belief.



At the same time, if antitrust concerns do not halt the planned merger with Albertsons, Kroger is set to become the second-largest food retailer, controlling nearly a quarter of the entire grocery market in the U.S., all fed by a sprawling produce supply chain.

The festering human rights problem in its supply chain will only grow once the merger is complete. At the annual shareholder meeting held June 22, shareholders gathered to vote on Kroger's future. Their decisions will impact not only consumers at checkout, but hundreds of thousands of farmworkers across the western hemisphere.

This latest horrific case of modern-day slavery in Kroger's supply chain is a wake-up call. It is time for Kroger not only to recognize the problem, but to turn to the only proven solution in the world of corporate accountability: the presidential-medal winning Fair Food Program, which has effectively eradicated forced labor and other extreme abuses on participating farms and

has been upheld as a model for guaranteeing dignified working conditions for those who harvest the food on our tables.

The Fair Food Program is recognized by law enforcement agencies across the U.S. government and the United Nations as the best program for fighting forced labor in global supply chains. The program is built on legally-binding agreements with market consequences for farms that violate farmworkers' rights. It represents a uniquely effective partnership among farmers, farmworkers and retail food companies that ensures humane wages and working conditions on participating farms. Large food retailers agree to give preferential access to participating growers that treat their workers fairly and to transfer their purchases to other growers if they do not.

Kroger's silence when confronted with proof that it has bought and sold forced labor-harvested produce is chilling. It is all the more concerning since Kroger allegedly has a "zero tolerance" policy against forced labor in its supply chain and uses social compliance audit programs it claims are equally effective as the Fair Food Program.

Given Kroger's failure to deliver on the promised protections for farmworkers from human rights abuses in its own supply chain, why should workers and consumers believe the CEOs of Kroger and Albertsons when they insist in the pages of the *Enquirer* that this merger will only benefit workers and consumers alike? What guarantees can Kroger make to the broader American public about its efforts at social responsibility as it seeks to become the second-largest grocer in the country?

Kroger will soon wield colossal purchasing power. Research has shown that this power will direct immense downward pressure on prices at the farm level, forcing suppliers to lower costs – and especially wages and working conditions – even further just to preserve their shrinking margin. The Los Villatoros Harvesting forced labor case demonstrates the depths to which some farms will go to slash their own labor costs and the ways that current temporary

work visa programs can lead to systemic human rights abuses. Tragically, this combined market power and lack of effective oversight means cases like Los Villatoros Harvesting may become more common within Kroger's supply chain.

Fortunately, this is not a problem without an answer.

Kroger's competitors, like Walmart, Trader Joe's and Whole Foods, have already joined the program. Given Kroger's outsized presence in the retail economy, it is long past time for them to join the Fair Food Program, take on the great responsibility that comes with great power, and address the urgent human rights crisis in its supply chain by joining the Fair Food Program. Otherwise, the rise of Cincinnati's most successful business risks being further tainted by the kind of horrific exploitation America has struggled to overcome for centuries.

Gerardo Reyes-Chavez is a senior staff member with the award-winning human rights organization, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW). A farmworker who has worked in the fields since age 11, first as a peasant farmer in Mexico and then in the fields of Florida, Mr. Reyes conducts workers' rights education with thousands of farmworkers on farms across the US as part of the Fair Food Program.