

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 hashed 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 roughly 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 increase years ago, 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 \$520 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.

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if enough buyers turn to competitors in California and Mexico willing to sell tomatoes at a cheaper price.

"We hope that socially responsible businesses will purchase tomatoes from our growers and not cheaper tomatoes from Mexican farm competitors," said Reggie Brown, executive vice president of the Florida Tomato Growers Exchange, a trade association that represents 80 percent of the state's tomato farmers. "Everybody in the system has to be invested for it to work."

Whole Foods supported the coalition because helping laborers earn a better wage was in line with the company's core values and did not cost much, said Karen Christensen, a regional vice president.

"The impact of the penny per pound is a minimal addition to our purchase," Ms. Christensen said. "We have not seen a noticeable impact on the consumer."

Maisie Greenawalt, vice president of the catering company Bon Appétit, which serves hundreds of colleges in the United States, said her company was paying more for tomatoes because it had a policy to work with agricultural companies that follow ethical practices.

"Having a food system that keeps prices artificially low by enslaving workers is not acceptable," Ms. Greenawalt said.

But not everyone is on board. Maria Brous, a spokeswoman for Publix Super Markets, based in Lakeland, Fla., said the extra money farmworkers want to be paid should come from the growers who employ them.

Regardless, Ms. Brous added, whatever the tomatoes cost, "customers will make their own purchasing decisions."

The Immokalee agreement is a result of a 15-year campaign for better pay and working conditions for the roughly 33,000 tomato pickers in the state. The Coalition of Immokalee Workers represents about 4,000 of those workers, but the agreement will cover all tomato pickers who work for growers that are members of the trade association, as well as those employed by independent farms participating in the agreement.

The agreement between laborers, growers and buyers is unique because it resembles a legally binding contract that includes an accountability mechanism to ensure that tomato pickers will be treated and paid fairly, said Prof. Caroline Bettinger-Lopez, director of the Human Rights Clinic at the University of Miami School of Law.

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"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 1950s. The workers gather nearly every morning before dawn in a dusty parking lot in front of the La Fiesta No. 3 market waiting to board the buses that will ferry them to the fields.

Leonel Perez, a 25-year-old from Guatemala, has worked on farms since 2005, often pulling 16-hour days for relatively little pay. For the last four years he has also worked with the Coalition of Immokalee Workers to organize his peers.

"Even though it's a small increase, we see that they're treating us fairly," Mr. Perez said. "Now we're working comfortably, and contractors can't abuse their power or reprimand us unfairly."



A market in Immokalee, a town that has long been home to many of the state's 33,000 tomato pickers.

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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 rep-

resents 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.