

# Coalition of Immokalee Workers gets Presidential Medal

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January 30, 2015



*Secretary of State John Kerry honors members of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers at a White House ceremony Thursday.*

*(Photo: Special to The News-Press)*

The Coalition of Immokalee Workers has received the 2014 Presidential Medal for Extraordinary Efforts to Combat Human Trafficking.

Secretary of State John Kerry presented the medal to members of the group at a ceremony Thursday at the White House's annual Forum on Human Trafficking.

In his remarks, Kerry said, "This is an extraordinary accomplishment, and reminds all of us not just of the work that we have to do, but that dedicated individuals, like those here with us today from the coalition, can strike out against injustice, break down barriers, and make a world of difference."

The grass-roots group began working 20 years ago to improve wages and often abysmal labor conditions in Florida's tomato fields, which supply the nation with 90 percent of its winter tomatoes.

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Kerry detailed the nonprofit's partnership with local and federal law enforcement over the years, as it's helped uncover farm slavery operations across the Southeastern United States. "I hope everybody hears that," he said. "Farm slavery operations across the Southeastern United States. Over the past 15 years, nine major investigations and federal prosecutions have freed more than 1,200 Florida farmworkers from captivity and forced labor, with the coalition playing a key part in seven of those operations."

One who was on the front lines with them was Fort Myers attorney Doug Molloy, who prosecuted a number of high-profile slavery cases and was an internationally acclaimed anti-trafficking crusader until retiring as chief assistant U.S. attorney for Southwest Florida in 2013.

Their work is invaluable, Molloy said. "As the eyes and ears and conscience of the community, they helped liberate more slaves and helped develop more successful prosecutions than any other group of people I am aware of in all the work I have done in human trafficking," he said.



Molloy (Photo: SARAH COWARD/THE NEWS-PRESS)

News of the honor was gratifying to area supporters, who've watched the coalition from its beginnings as a handful of workers meeting in a church. It's now an organization that's convinced Wal-Mart, the world's largest retailer, as well as major fast-food chains, Whole Foods and the Fresh Market, among others, to join its Fair Food Program. In addition to improving working conditions, program participants pay an extra penny-per-pound premium to tomato harvesters.

That bonus means workers who once made 50 cents for every 32-pound bucket they picked, now make 82 cents, which can boost annual earnings from around \$10,000 to more than \$16,000.

The Fair Food Program includes worker-to-worker education and a complaint investigation and resolution process backed by market consequences for employers who violate the standards.

Herrera

Herrera (Photo: news-press.com)

Yet for all the strides the coalition has made, it's retained its original vision, said Cape Coral artist, film director and activist Daniel Herrera, whose movie, "Immokalee U.S.A." details life in the group's gritty Collier County town. "It's picked up where Cesar Chavez left off," he said, "while looking ahead to the vision he had for farmworkers across the country."

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Since the Fair Food Program became a reality four years ago, Florida's \$650 million tomato industry has undergone a major metamorphosis. Once plagued by sexual harassment, wage theft, modern-day slavery and subpoverty earnings, it's now a model for solid practices — what best-selling author and journalist Bill Moyers, who features the coalition on his website, calls "the gold standard for human rights in the fields today."

Co-founder Laura Germino said, "We are tremendously honored to have received the Presidential Medal for our work against the crime of forced labor, and especially honored by the White House's recognition of the Fair Food Program for having moved beyond prosecution of the crime to actual prevention."

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