

INTERNATIONAL
Herald Tribune

Burger King fires 2 after blog controversy

The Associated Press

Wednesday, May 14, 2008

MIAMI: Burger King said Tuesday it fired two employees following the disclosure that an executive secretly posted blogs slamming a farmworker advocacy group.

The Miami-based fast-food chain did not name the individuals who were fired. It also said it is discontinuing the use of a private investigation firm whose president allegedly posed as a student activist to infiltrate the farmworker group and its supporters.

Burger King is in a public relations feud with the Coalition of Immokalee Workers over how to improve wages and working conditions for Florida's tomato pickers.

"Following an investigation, Burger King Corporation has terminated two employees who participated in unauthorized activity on public Web sites which did not reflect the company's views and which were in violation of company policy," the company said in a statement.

The company owned by Burger King Holdings Inc. said it had scheduled a meeting for this week with the Coalition of Immokalee Workers to find ways to ensure decent wages and working conditions for the region's harvesters.

The coalition declined to comment on whether a meeting had been scheduled.

Earlier, coalition co-founder Lucas Benitez said in a statement the group welcomed Burger King's actions but said more needed to be done "to clear the path toward a sincere partnership for more humane conditions in Burger King's tomato supply chain."

Burger King's announcement comes a week after The Associated Press confirmed an e-mail it received in January from an individual purporting to support the coalition appeared to be sent from the company's server.

In March, an individual using the same password-protected e-mail account sent a message to a student group that supports the coalition, according to an AP investigation. That individual claimed to be a University of Virginia graduate student named "Kevin" who wanted to help the coalition boost farmworker wages. The individual asked to listen in on the group's strategy call regarding efforts to pressure Burger King to pay more for its Florida tomatoes.

When asked to identify himself further by the AP and the alliance, the individual did not respond.

Later that month, Cara Schaffer, head of the private investigation firm Diplomatic Tactical Services, also posed as a student interested in the coalition's activities, according to the student group. Her company's Web site says it specializes in labor relations, including covert and overt surveillance.

Burger King said Tuesday it "discontinued the services provided by Diplomatic Tactical Services Inc. for violation of the company's code of conduct."

The company says it had contracted the firm to provide general safety advice and security services during high profile events such as global conventions and shareholders' meetings.

A local paper identified Web postings linked to Burger King Vice President Stephen Grover describing the coalition as "an attack organization lining the leaders (sic) pockets ... They make up issues and collect money from dupes that believe their story. To (sic) bad the people protesting don't have a clue regarding the facts. A bunch of fools!" He used his middle school daughter's screen name to make the posting.

Burger King's Chief Executive Officer John Chidsey said he was distressed to learn of the allegations.

"Neither I nor any of my senior management team were aware of or condone the unauthorized activities in question," he said in a company statement.

In a speech last fall at Davidson College, Chidsey said the media has misrepresented the issue of Florida tomato picker wages and conditions and that the average tomato picker earns \$12.56 an hour. He said farmworkers are paid better than many Burger King restaurant workers.

The Immokalee coalition has long disputed Chidsey's assertions, and U.S. lawmakers have called for an investigation into worker wages and conditions.

The coalition wants Burger King to join McDonald's Corp. and Yum Brands Inc., which have already agreed to pay more for their Florida tomatoes, so long as growers pass the extra money on to their workers. Those agreements also call on the companies to work with the coalition to establish a code of conduct for their suppliers.

But since last fall, those deals have existed on paper only after the industry group representing Florida tomato growers refused to allow its members to participate.

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