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Students join Burger King protest

BY JOSE PAGLIERY

Holding tomato signs and banners of kings, students from around the state joined protesters Friday as they marched in the sun from Goldman Sachs & Co. in downtown Miami to Burger King Corporate Headquarters.

Their goal: to bring attention to the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, claiming abuse and demanding 1 cent more per pound of tomatoes they pick -- tomatoes Burger King puts into its sandwiches.

When Burger King executives called the CIW's "penny-per-pound" demand a "public relations gimmick," more than 400 protesters marched from one of the company's largest investors to its main office.

"As students, we do have a certain position of privilege," said Pablo Avendano, a member of United Students Against Sweatshop at Florida International University.

University of Miami student Laura Edwins is a member of Students Towards A New Democracy, which hopes to inform consumers and convince them to stop buying BK burgers.

"I personally feel that these people just want to be treated like humans, and that's not too much to ask. It's not that much of a raise, and we have the responsibility to work in solidarity with causes like this," Edwins said.

FIU student Andrew Santa Lucia feels the same .

"Missing one day of class for this is nothing -- we're fighting for the equality of workers around the world," he said.

But Burger King's Steve Grover, vice president of food safety, quality assurance and regulatory compliance, believes the students are misdirected.

"Don't buy into the politics of controversy and conflict," Grover said.

For more than two years, the company has asked the CIW to provide evidence of worker abuse. According to Grover, the activist group has yet to do so. But the CIW has presented numerous documentaries on the abuse at college campuses, including FIU and UM.

Students admit the tactic is provocative, saying they don't have a choice.

"We know how these corporations work. Rarely will they react to evidence. What changes the CEOs minds is people protesting, developing campaigns and affecting their ability to make profit," Avendano said.

Grover, who saw the protesters outside his building, still views their attempts as futile because the field workers are not Burger King employees themselves.

"We can't set wages in other industries. There are too many legal hurdles for us to do that," he said.

Meanwhile, marchers outside the quiet, air-conditioned building raised their fists, yelling, "*Si se puede, si se puede.*" or "Yes, it's possible."

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