



Immokalee Coalition hosts student group concerned about working conditions

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The drive down from Michigan was just the start of the journey for Rudi Heumann.

On her way to Immokalee, the Central Michigan University student opted for a side trip to Naples first. The small detour solidified her reason for attending the third annual Student Farmworker Alliance's Encuentro (Gathering) this Labor Day weekend.

"It was definitely a contrast," said Heumann, 20. "Very privileged people, living next to very poor people and not taking an interest in their neighbors."

Heumann was among 90 students from across the country who attended the Alliance's four-day event at the Guadalupe Center's Sanders Hall.

The Student Farmworker Alliance, or SFA, is a national network of youth and student organizations allied with the Coalition of Immokalee Workers. Their mutual goal is to eliminate sweatshop working conditions and modern-day slavery in the fields.

Aimed at uniting the broad SFA network, Encuentro has grown from the initial 60 participants to this year's 90 attendees from California, Pennsylvania, Michigan, New York and Florida.

"It's always a good experience to come down to Immokalee and see what the reality is like," said SFA member Marc Rodrigues, 26, of Immokalee. "It's something that gets people energized. When they (the attendees) go back to their homes and schools, they are ready to be more involved. Everybody leaves learning something new and making new connections."

More importantly, all participants know going in that they're not going to be pampered at Encuentro -- they are going to work.

"We're not going to put you up in any luxurious accommodations in Immokalee," Rodrigues said of the humble lodgings provided by the Guadalupe Center. "You're going to be sleeping on the floor and everyone is going to be pitching in, to make it happen. It goes along with our philosophy that everyone should be working together and doing an equal share of the work."

Also on the agenda was formulating a plan for the "Campaign for Fair Food" among Burger King's target youth demographic.

"While Burger King might consider us the target market, we have news for Burger King," said Jordan Buckley, 25, a recent graduate of the University of Texas and returning Encuentro attendee. "We are making them our target, in solidarity with the (Coalition), demanding that they take responsibility for the unethical business practices that fuel their profit-making."

As part of the effort, the group traveled across the state Friday to protest against Burger King at its

corporate headquarters in Miami and to deliver a letter for company CEO John Chidsey, asking Burger King to pay a premium for tomatoes and pass on the increase to tomato pickers.

According to the Coalition, Florida tomato pickers currently earn 40 cents to 45 cents for every 32-pound bucket of tomatoes picked -- or \$50 in a day for two tons of tomatoes.

Farmworkers regularly work 10- to 12-hour days with no overtime pay, no health insurance, no right to organize, no sick days and no benefits.

The letter also chided the company for its refusal to work with the Coalition and to expose the working conditions in the fields where Burger King's tomatoes are picked.

"We are here today because our patience is wearing thin. For over two years, you have been given the opportunity to work with the (Coalition) and take responsibility for the extreme poverty and degradation faced by thousands of women and men who harvest tomatoes for your hamburgers, poverty to which Burger King's tomato purchasing practices have contributed directly," the letter said.

After hours of protesting, the letter was accepted by Burger King representatives and the students felt their efforts would help the cause.

"It was very frustrating (when they initially didn't want to accept the letter)," said Heumann, adding that the company's reticence spurred the students on. "It was empowering. We didn't give up."

Burger King isn't the first national fast-food chain targeted.

The Coalition reached an agreement to improve wages and working conditions for Florida farmworkers with Yum! Brands in 2005. An agreement also was reached with McDonald's earlier this year, days before the announcement of a massive boycott was scheduled.

So it's up to a new generation to help get the word out.

"That's why we as students have taken it upon ourselves, to stand up against that and say we are not going to stand for the poverty of our neighbors," Heumann said. "We are fighting with them in the struggle."

Buckley agreed.

"What we're fundamentally looking at here is the issue of human rights," Buckley said. "Humans fundamentally need to be treated with dignity and that's not taking place in the fields of Florida."

For more information on the SFA visit sfalliance.org.

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