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Oppressed group vows to fight on Plight largely unknown, pickers seek justice

AMY BENNETT WILLIAMS
awilliams@news-press.com

Hot. Poor. Far.

Those are the first three words that come to Nancy Bridges' mind when asked about Immokalee. It's a safe bet other randomly chosen Lee Countians' lists would be similar.

Never mind that the place is as close to Fort Myers as is Captiva; for Bridges, 60, Immokalee may as well be another country.

And if it were, it would be a country rippling with revolution.

From its folklorically threadbare office, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers has spent the past 15 years working to right wrongs dating to the New Deal and win the support of people like Bridges, a self-described mainstream housewife.

"What happens in Immokalee stays in Immokalee, as far as I know," she said, as she bagged about a pound of on-the-stem tomatoes at the First Street Village Publix in Fort Myers. "I've heard it's pretty third-world, but I've never been there, actually."

Coalition co-founder Lucas Benitez and his supporters believe that if Bridges knew what hardships the farmworkers face, she'd care. And that she'd be willing to buy tomatoes accordingly.

Greg Asbed of the coalition said a mere penny-per-pound raise — approved but not yet implemented — would mean workers' annual earnings could rise from about \$10,000 to between \$16,000 and \$17,000. That would enable them to pay for better food, shelter and health care for themselves and their children.

To that end, the coalition has been asking fast-food companies for the increase (so far, Yum! Brands, McDonald's and Burger King have agreed to it) and working to educate consumers about the lives of the people who harvest their tomatoes.

“I really believe that if you shine the light on workers’ conditions, the American people would not be comfortable with it,” said Mary Bauer, who directs the Southern Poverty Law Center’s Immigrant Justice Project. “It’s easy to avoid it — easy to live in Fort Myers and go to the beach not knowing what conditions are making possible the lovely produce you find in Publix.”

Although there are no exact numbers, there are probably between 10,000 and 30,000 migrant farmworkers in Florida, according to government and nonprofit groups. They face stagnant, sub-poverty wages, often decrepit housing and no right to overtime, sick leave or collective bargaining, Bauer and the coalition say.

“The conditions in the South — including Florida — are the the worst in the country,” said Bauer, who testified in April at Senate hearings on pickers’ working conditions. Before she testified, Bauer interviewed a number of Immokalee workers.

“There was a definite theme,” she said. “They told me, ‘We are living in grinding poverty and we are getting cheated every day.’”

Bridges, for the record, wants no part of food that’s the result of misery.

“Of course not,” she said, “who would?”

Roots in the New Deal

Closing the gap between that ideal and reality has been a coalition focus.

In that way, they’re honoring the legacy of Edward R. Murrow, whose landmark documentary “Harvest of Shame” has become a touchstone of the farm labor movement and for years has worked its way into countless news headlines.

Filmed in Immokalee in 1960, the documentary chronicled the lives of mostly African-American farmworkers with images of haggard pickers, hungry kids, backbreaking stoop labor and squalid shacks.

In many ways, Bauer says, only the names and skin color have changed.

Blame FDR, says Tallahassee-based Florida Legal Services attorney Rob Williams, who practiced in Immokalee from 1975 to 1991.

“The American way of life was shaped by the New Deal — the right to organize, the right to a minimum wage, to unemployment compensation, Social Security and more ... but it excluded farmworkers. Remember, this was back in the 1930s, when the majority of them were African-Americans,” Williams said. “Interestingly, the only other group singled out for exclusion from the New Deal was domestic servants.”

Williams contends that agriculture depends on a work force with no other options. Adding to many tomato pickers’ disempowerment is their status as undocumented immigrants. Williams said his organization figures that number to be about 66 percent. On top of it, sometimes, they’re enslaved, which degrades the economy as well.

“If somebody can produce something at reduced labor costs, they undercut all their competitors who are playing by the rules,” said John Bowe, author of the book “Nobodies: Modern American Slave

Labor and the Dark Side of the New Global Economy.” “And that cuts to the heart of democracy.”

Yet most Southwest Florida farmworkers aren't part of that democracy.

“They are nobody's constituency,” said Lake Worth lawyer Greg Schell, who works with Florida Legal Services' Migrant Farmworker Justice Project. “They've never been a meaningful voting bloc. They've never had any real power.”

Pablo Garcia would second that. Originally from Nayarit, Mexico, the 26-year-old said in Spanish that he applauds the work of the coalition, which is just blocks from the trailer he shares with six others, including a brother and two cousins.

“We need something like (the coalition) to be the engine,” he said. “What are a bunch of guys from somewhere else going to do? We're not part of the world here in any real sense.”

With each coalition victory, however, that changes.

“It's very hard for one company to make a change ahead of the pack because they suffer a competitive disadvantage,” Bowe says, “but when three huge corporations are doing it, they have critical mass. I'm sure they're now happy to be showing well-publicized social responsibility.”

What Bowe doesn't understand is the growers' resistance.

Even though the three companies have agreed to pay pickers the increase (and Burger King even kicked in an extra half-cent a pound to cover payroll taxes and other costs), the Florida Tomato Growers Exchange — to which most of the growers belong — adamantly opposes the plan. Exchange vice president Reggie Brown said in Senate testimony it would be impossible to know how much to pay each worker.

According to the agreement, workers get bonus checks from the restaurants in addition to their regular paychecks. That happened for two seasons, until the Florida Tomato Growers Exchange began refusing to pass on the additional money in 2007. Since then, McDonald's and Yum! have been placing the additional penny in escrow.

The growers had threatened to levy a \$100,000 fine on any member who paid the penny per pound. In April, Brown told The News-Press the group was rescinding that, but reiterated that its opposition was as strong as ever.

It's unclear what form that opposition could take. Brown has not responded to repeated e-mails, nor has he returned numerous phone calls.

“If you crunch the numbers of who makes what in the food business, it's a plenty profitable business,” said Bowe. (The USDA reports the country's tomato crop is worth some \$2 billion annually, and Florida supplies 90 percent of all winter tomatoes.)

“I think the fact that they're holding on to a system that's so clearly broken means that they just don't want to be told what to do,” Bowe said.

For its part, Burger King also refuses to say how it intends to ensure the money reaches the pickers, given the growers' opposition. After dozens of calls and e-mails asking that question, spokeswoman

Denise Wilson wrote, “We (Burger King Corp.) have no further comment at this time.”

All along, comments from Burger King haven’t always been easy to get — or entirely reliable.

Before the company agreed to the increase, one of its vice presidents, Steven Grover, surreptitiously made false, disparaging online comments about the coalition using his middle-school daughter’s screen name. And Cara Schaffer, who owns a private investigation firm Burger King used, infiltrated a student group helping the coalition.

At the time, then-Burger King spokesman Keva Silversmith said he knew nothing about any spying on the Immokalee groups, but in May, he and Grover were fired for violating the company’s ethics policy. Burger King also admitted it had used Schaffer’s firm, Diplomatic Tactical Services, in the past, but would stop.

Grover’s use of his daughter’s screen name to vilify the coalition brought national and international attention, including a place on MSNBC news commentator Keith Olbermann’s “Worst Person in the World” list.

Schaffer’s activities resulted in a state investigation that’s pending. In addition, public records show that although she completed security guard training at Big Al’s Pawn and Gun in Pembroke Park, her file contains a letter from the Broward County State Attorney’s office citing four charges of grand theft auto in 1999, when she was 17. Because of that and a 1999 charge of larceny of a testamentary instrument (such as a will), the state denied her application for a firearms license, writing: “You fail to qualify ... in that you lack respect for laws of this state and nation.”

More firms targeted

Almost as soon as Burger King signed the deal with the coalition and the cheering died down, Benitez and his colleagues were back in battle. This time, they’re aiming for Chipotle, Subway and Whole Foods.

Benitez finds the need for yet another fight frustrating.

“At this point, with the three largest restaurant companies in the world now squarely behind the principles of the campaign for fair food, every possible question about the campaign has been asked and answered,” he said. “It’s time for us to stop fighting the same battle over and over again, company by company, and for restaurant and supermarket companies to start working with us.”

As for the growers’ continued opposition, coalition member Gerardo Reyes Chavez said in the short-term it will keep working with the major buyers of Florida tomatoes and with the Senate, but in the long term, ordinary people will be the key to real change.

The goal, Reyes Chavez said, is to work with consumers to press the people at the top of the industry to respect the people at the bottom until, for the growers, “the incentive to do the right thing finally outweighs the instinct to do what’s been done for decades — pay and treat farmworkers like we were disposable human beings.”