

“Harvest of Shame” (CBS, 1960)
Campaign for Fair Food Discussion Guide

Overview: Legendary journalist Edward R. Murrow's “Harvest of Shame” is among the most famous television documentaries of all time. Richly photographed and arrestingly poignant, this long-acclaimed exposé on the plight of migrant farmworkers aired the day after Thanksgiving in 1960 and resonated deeply for a nation unfamiliar with such brutally honest depictions of living conditions that, as Murrow remarks, “wrong the dignity of man.”

Half a century later, the Campaign for Fair Food is bringing fairer wages and more humane labor conditions to Florida's fields through a historic alliance of farmworkers, consumers, growers, and retail food industry leaders. While the transition to a more just Florida tomato industry is finally underway, much remains to be done to ensure a future of dignity and respect for the workers who plant and pick our nation's fruits and vegetables.

Directions: Screen the first twenty minutes of “Harvest of Shame.” Next, screen either “The Battle Fields” (NOW with David Brancaccio, 2005) or “Farm Workers Claim Slavery” (Iowa Public Television, 2008). Email workers@ciw-online.org for a free DVD copy. Conclude with a group discussion about the films and Campaign for Fair Food.

Discussion Questions:

- What images did you find most striking in the two films?
- What are the similarities and differences between migrant farm labor as depicted in “Harvest of Shame” and fifty years later?
- One grower in “Harvest of Shame” stated, “We used to own our slaves. Now we just rent them.” What does this reveal about the legacy of slavery in relation to migrant farm labor?
- In 1960, farmworkers earned \$900/year (\$6,567 adjusted to 2009 dollars). Why have annual earnings for farmworkers remained nearly stagnant over the past half-century?
- What are the root causes of farmworker poverty according to the CIW? What solutions to farmworker poverty stem from this analysis?
- What are some of the factors that spurred a transition from a predominantly African American to a Latin American and Caribbean immigrant workforce?
- How can consumers and farmworkers organize for a more just agricultural industry? What are ways that we can support the Campaign for Fair Food locally?

Contemporary Facts and Figures:

- Florida tomato pickers earn an average of 45 cents per 32-lb. bucket of tomatoes, a rate that has not risen significantly since 1978. As a result, workers today have to pick over twice the number of buckets per hour to earn minimum wage as they did in 1980. At today's piece rate, workers have to pick over 2 ½ tons of tomatoes just to earn the equivalent of Florida minimum wage for a 10-hour workday.
- In a January 2001 letter to members of Congress, the U.S. Department of Labor described farmworkers as "a labor force in significant economic distress," citing farmworkers' "low wages, sub-poverty annual earnings, [and] significant periods of un- and underemployment to support its conclusions.
- As a result of exclusion from key New Deal labor reform measures, farmworkers do not have the right to overtime pay, nor the right to organize and collectively bargain with their employers.
- In the most extreme conditions, farmworkers are held against their will and forced to work for little or no pay, facing conditions that meet the stringent legal standards for prosecution under modern-day slavery statutes. Federal Civil Rights officials have prosecuted seven slavery operations involving over 1,000 workers in Florida's fields since 1997. One federal prosecutor called Florida "ground zero for modern-day slavery."

Additional Fair Food Resources:

- Farmworker Facts & Figures: <http://sfalliance.org/resources/09FactsFigures.pdf>
- Slavery in the Food We Eat: <http://sfalliance.org/resources/Slaveryinthefields09.pdf>
- Campaign for Fair Food FAQ: <http://sfalliance.org/resources/09FairFoodFAQ.pdf>
- Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW): <http://sfalliance.org/resources/09CIWwho.pdf>

Additional Reading on Florida Farm Labor History:

- Cassanello, Robert and Melanie Shell-Weis, eds. *Florida's Working-Class Past: Current Perspectives on Labor, Race, and Gender from Spanish Florida to the New Immigration*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009.
- Hahamovitch, Cindy. *The Fruits of Their Labor: Atlantic Coast Farmworkers and the Making of Migrant Poverty*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997.
- Sellers, Sean. "Del pueblo, para el pueblo: The Coalition of Immokalee Workers and the Fight for Fair Food." Graduate Thesis (M.A.), University of Texas at Austin, 2009.
- Visit <http://sfalliance.org/bibliography.html> for a Fair Food bibliography.