

## The Farmworker is Our Hope: Organizing and Victory in Immokalee

<i>Yo fui a la Revolución a luchar por el derecho de sentir sobre mi pecho una gran satisfacción. Pero hoy vivo en un rincón cantándole a mi amargura pero con la fe segura y gritándole al destino que es el hombre campesino nuestra esperanza futura.</i>	<i>I joined the Revolution to fight for the right to feel within me a great fulfillment. But now I am overlooked singing to my bitterness but with the certain faith and crying out to fate that it is the farmworker who is our future hope.<sup>1</sup></i>
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“It’s a slap in the face. It’s a slap in the face that we work so hard for so many hours and then need charity to get a turkey. It’s an insult to our dignity...”<sup>2</sup> As Gerardo Reyes-Chavez says these words, I look around the crowd and see many of the 70 or so farmworkers in attendance nodding. It’s the weekly Wednesday night meeting at the organization’s small office in downtown Immokalee. Gerardo, along with fellow farmworkers and staff members Francisca Cortez and Rolando Sales, is facilitating this week’s discussion.

Besides the upcoming Thanksgiving holiday, topics of the meeting include the recent protest against the School of the Americas, which almost 30 members and staff of the organization attended. In addition, attendees are encouraged to sign up for an upcoming *formación*<sup>3</sup> focusing on the nascent campaign against McDonald’s. It’s the first time at the office for about 40% of the people in the room; many haven’t even heard of the successful boycott the organization led against Taco Bell.

About two hours prior, the farmworkers who make up most of the staff of the organization went door to door to encouraging participation at that evening’s meeting, armed with half-page fliers depicting one of the organization’s popular-education-style drawings: 2 *rancheros* (growers) labeled *ellos* (them), sitting at an abundant table about to enjoy a large turkey; the legs of the table replaced by crouching farmworkers labeled *nosotros* (us). This is the Coalition of Immokalee Workers.

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<sup>1</sup>Written by Arcadio Hidalgo, a verse of *Son Jarocho*, popular music with roots in the Afro-Mexican communities of Veracruz. This song and style of music became a staple at CIW events courtesy of Son Del Centro, a collective of young musicians based out of a cultural center in Santa Ana, California.

<sup>2</sup> See “Groups to feed Collier’s needy on Thanksgiving,” Naples Daily News, November 22, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Day-long meeting and strategy session.

Since it's the first meeting for so many people, an explanation is in order. "Strikes showed us our power and what we're capable of, they got us some improvements but not the systematic, industry-wide changes we are seeking. So we knew we had to pressure the large purchasers to put pressure to improve conditions industry-wide. But this won't happen because of people outside of Immokalee but because of people here," Gerardo states, drumming up interest in the *formación*. He continues, "who is the Coalition? Is it these four walls? This office doesn't mean shit. The coalition is all of us. The coalition is here," he says, pointing to his chest.

Analyzing the decade-plus history of the CIW, this paper will show that its organizing philosophy and dedication to member involvement have led it to impressive victories on a local and national level. The CIW shows that marginalized and excluded workers are not inherently "powerless" or dependant upon the resources of external elites to affect change. The CIW represents the organization of an excluded group through indigenous resources and innovative, disruptive tactics towards the end of building social power. The strength of the CIW model is particularly evident when analyzing the national boycott campaign against Taco Bell. Such campaigns have the potential to take resources and attention away from organizing at the base. For the CIW, however, the boycott campaign was an extension of its previous work and philosophy as evidenced by the centrality of the membership not only in the public actions of the boycott but also in the design, formulation, and strategizing of the campaign. The CIW's work, in particular the boycott, have made it the anchor of a national movement for fundamental change in the agricultural and foodservice industries, intersecting with the global justice, labor, and immigrant rights movements.

***Their labor is the basis of Florida's billion-dollar citrus and winter vegetable industries...***  
(Asbed, 2005: 35)

The Coalition of Immokalee Workers is an organization of mostly Mexican, Guatemalan, and Haitian workers in southwest Florida. Rather than a typical town, Immokalee could be thought of as a migrant labor camp. The permanent population of Immokalee is about 14,000 and increases to around 30,000 during the harvest season (roughly from October through May). Increasingly, the workers who migrate to Immokalee are from indigenous (mainly Mayan) communities in southern Mexico and

Guatemala, for whom Spanish is a second language. On any given street corner in Immokalee one can hear Spanish, Haitian Creole, and the indigenous languages Mam, Qanjobal, Mixtec, and Nahuatl being spoken.

80% of homes in Immokalee are mobile homes. Rent for a dilapidated trailer or shack is around \$200 to \$400 a week—“the price one would pay to rent a three-bedroom house in a middle-class Miami suburb” (Ramírez, 2005). 8 to 12 farmworkers often crowd into one trailer to afford rent. A single family—the Blockers—owns hundreds of trailers in the downtown area close to the central lot where workers gather before sunrise each day to look for work. Workers’ lack of vehicle ownership and mobility leads local landlords and merchants to engage in this type of price gouging. In this southern “Right to Work” state traditionally dependent on the exploitation of agricultural workers, Immokalee is the plantation and the Blockers and corporate growers such as Six L’s and Gargiulo are the plantation overseers.

These corporations and others such as Pacific Land Co. and AgMart may not be household names, but they are among the region’s wealthiest and most powerful. Pacific Land Co. owns 17,200 acres of farmland in Florida, with annual sales of \$100 million; Six L’s accounts for 13,600 acres and \$64 million (Rural Migration News, 2005). Gargiulo is also one of largest strawberry growers in California. These large agribusinesses—not the idyllic farmer on a small plot of land—are the dominant growers in southwest Florida and throughout the east coast.

The Immokalee area accounts for the vast majority of many fruits and vegetables consumed throughout the country during the winter (Williams, 2005), including over 90% of winter tomatoes, as well as  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the year-round citrus stock (Schneider, 2005).

The CIW was born out of the miserable wages and working conditions endured by farmworkers—what the Coalition refers to as “sweatshops in the fields.” Stagnant at pre-1980 (before many workers in Immokalee were born) levels, piece rates of 35 to 45 cents per 32-pound bucket of tomatoes mean that the average farmworker has to pick two tons of tomatoes to make \$50 in one day (CIW, 2005a). Within this system of huge pressures to keep costs low, several cases of modern-day slavery have taken root. These cases involve workers in debt bondage to their supervisors, who control every aspect of their lives on and off the job through violence, intimidation, and the open brandishing and use

of firearms. The CIW's worker-based anti-slavery campaign has thus far liberated over 1,000 enslaved agricultural workers (CIW, 2005b).

On a typical day, a farmworker in Immokalee wakes up at 4:30am, prepares lunch, and walks to the town's central parking lot. There, the worker attempts to get work for the day with a labor contractor (there is no guarantee of work from day to day). After a ride to the fields which may last as long as two hours, the worker waits further for the tomato plants to dry before starting to pick. At this point the worker has yet to earn a dime. For the next 8-12 hours, workers dash to fill as many buckets possible with tomatoes, crouching over to reach the plants and running back and forth to the truck they must literally throw the 30-pound-plus bucket loads into. After a full day in the sweltering sun, the worker rides back to Immokalee and emerges once again in the central parking lot with their hands, arms and clothing stained with sweat and tomato and pesticide residue. If lucky, the worker has made \$40 to \$60. If it rained or tomatoes were not plentiful, however, the worker has little or nothing to show for their effort at the end of the day (Sales, 2005).

Farmworkers in Florida have no right to overtime pay and have no health benefits, sick leave, paid vacation or pension plans. While they are covered under the FSLA for minimum wage purposes, the lack of timekeeping in the fields, the undocumented status of many workers, and the pressure to keep wages low make a mockery of these regulations. Migrant workers in Florida who are Hispanic [sic] are "killed in workplace accidents three times more often than other ethnic groups" (Bradenton Herald, 2005). Labor inspections in the fields are practically nonexistent as officials don't want to fine growers or scare off undocumented workers in such a vital sector to the state's economy (Ibid).<sup>4</sup> In addition, according to the U.S. Department of Labor, "farmworkers rarely access the safety net intended to cushion the blow of poverty for the working poor" (CIW, 2005c). Florida's farmworkers, like other immigrant workers, therefore benefit American capital (grossly underpaid labor) and subsidize a system (through payroll & sales taxes) that they themselves receive little or no benefit or protection from.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> This utter disregard (and sometimes open hostility) is one of the reasons why the CIW decided to target the large tomato purchasers rather than state government or regulatory agencies. In another telling example, Governor Jeb Bush's agricultural liaison Luis Rodriguez is a former grower and paid consultant to an industry lobbying group.

<sup>5</sup> See Chang (2000) for further elaboration of this point.

Giant corporations such as Wal-Mart (which accounts for 19% of all grocery sales in the U.S.) and Yum! Brands<sup>6</sup> exert huge pressure on industry to keep wages low for farmworkers. Prices paid to growers for their tomatoes have dropped 21% over the past twenty years, while the consumer price index for tomatoes has increased 50% since 1992 (Oxfam America, 2004: 2). This results in higher profits for the retail and foodservice sectors and more incentive for growers to squeeze farmworker wages on the opposite end of the supply chain. Despite rising wages for most American workers from the late 1980's to late 1990's, and a near doubling in the sale of fruits and vegetables during the same period, farmworker wages decreased relative to other workers: from 54% of the hourly wage of production workers in 1989 to 48% in 1998 (Oxfam America, 2004: 12).

In recent years, the share of Florida tomatoes going to retailers has declined while that going to the foodservice sector, including fast food, has increased (Oxfam,28-29). Yum! Has its own purchasing cooperative, the United Foodservice Purchasing Co-op, to manage the supply chain for all 5 of its brands. The UFPC, in turn, obtains tomatoes through a single broker who purchases from 5 or 6 different growers (Oxfam, 29). This increasing consolidation of market power in fewer hands only serves to further drive down costs and subsequently farmworker wages: “squeezed by the buyers of their produce, growers pass on the costs and risks imposed on them to those on the lowest rung of the supply chain: the farmworkers they employ” (CIW, 2005d).<sup>7</sup> Conversely, this also makes corporations such as Yum! particularly vulnerable and well-equipped to respond to calls from groups such as the CIW to help in making industry-wide changes.

Taco Bell purchased approximately 10 million pounds of Florida tomatoes in 2004; its parent company Yum!, which operates 6,500 restaurants in the U.S., grossed over \$9 billion in profits the same year (Lantigua, 2005). According to Taco Bell's website, “147 million people see a Taco Bell commercial once a week—more than half of the U.S. population” (Leary, 2005). What can a supposedly “powerless” group of workers do in the face of such powerful adversaries?

***The CIW is the strength of the poor worker...*** (CIW, 2004: 347)

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<sup>6</sup> The largest fast-food company in the world, owner of Taco Bell, Pizza Hut, KFC, Long John Silver's, and A&W Restaurants.

<sup>7</sup> On the shifting of risk to those most vulnerable within the context of subcontracting and other changes in work over recent decades, see Mathew (2005): 70-82.

In the early 1990's, a group of workers who had experience in Haiti's *Mouvman Peyizan Papay* (peasant movement) and rural Mexican and Guatemalan social movements started to meet in a room borrowed from Immokalee's Catholic church to address the conditions they encountered in the fields and in the community. They developed the principles of popular education, leadership development, and strong political actions (CIW, 2004: 352). These principles have been the bedrocks of the CIW's struggle to the present day, a struggle which has achieved many milestones.

In 1995, the first general strike in the history of Immokalee mobilized 3,000 workers for one week, reversing a proposed decrease in pay from the Pacific corporation. Hundreds of workers occupied Immokalee's central lot through the course of the strike.

When a young worker was beaten in the field for requesting a drink of water in 1996, he showed up at the CIW's office bleeding profusely. That evening, 500 workers marched on the responsible supervisor's home, holding aloft the worker's blood-stained shirt. The march ended such incidents of violence in the fields around Immokalee.

Through late 1997 and early 1998, a second general strike followed by a month-long hunger strike by six CIW members resulted in a raise in the piece rate paid by the Gargiulo corporation, the first raise seen by farmworkers in Immokalee in over twenty years. In 1999, as a result of continuous organizing, growers Pacific and Nobles raised their piece rates. Hoping to open meaningful dialogue with growers, the CIW marched 230 miles from Ft. Myers to a grower's association meeting in Orlando in 2000 (CIW, 2001).

All of this resulted, by the late 1990's, in industry-wide raises of 13-25%, equivalent to several million dollars annually for the community in increased wages (CIW, 2005e). The Coalition's anti-slavery work makes it the modern-day "Harriet Tubmans, John Browns and Denmark Vesey's" (Buckley, 2005).

To understand how the CIW has been able to reach these accomplishments, it is necessary to look at their praxis of popular education and leadership development. Rooted in the theories of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire as well as the experiences of movements in Haiti, Mexico and Central America, the CIW uses popular education to raise and strengthen "critical consciousness" within each worker. The CIW's popular education uses "codes" such as drawings, theater, and videos (CIW, 2004: 354) to

encourage collective analysis and reflection by workers about their daily reality. Jennifer Gordon, co-founder of the Workplace Project, explains that popular education is based on the idea that people need to be “critically conscious” in order to act. This alone, of course, is not enough; workers also need a sense that there is an effort they can participate in together with others with whom they share some sense of community, and that the effort coincides with their own goals and interests, broadly defined. This is the “basic popular education model” that the CIW uses so well: “education that starts with participants’ reality, moves on to analyze the root causes of the systemic problems they face, discusses long-term and short-term solutions, moves into action, and returns to reflect and evaluate” (Gordon, 2001).

The reasons for the CIW to adapt an approach based on popular education and consciousness-raising are both ideological and practical. With the immense amount of turnover in the farmworker community, constant political education could never be abandoned. “The mentalities that divide the farmworker community against itself and sap its strength have to be overcome for united action to be possible” (Asbed, 2005). The CIW has been able to unite workers who would otherwise be in competition with one another, stemming from the piece rate system, different ethnicities and languages, and the pressure to make the most possible to send back to the home country. The Coalition explains, “our community is marked by turnover constantly and so we have new people every year, people who don’t know anything of the history of the struggle here... That in and of itself has demanded that we take this approach that is rooted more in individual worker awareness that then leads to action as opposed to organizing on a strictly union model.” (Adams, 2005).

Like the CIW membership cards that members wield against recalcitrant employers up and down the east coast as they follow the seasonal harvests, the analysis and consciousness resulting from popular education stays with people even after leaving Immokalee: “it may be a slow method in terms of raising consciousness, but it’s a lasting one, and creates changes that will not disappear. It’s been embraced by the grassroots and by the community,” declares CIW co-founder Lucas Benitez (Gonzalez, 2005: 22). As one observer notes, “the boycotts and the strikes are a big function of the coalition,” but the focus on consciousness-raising means that, for the CIW, “the real change takes place on a smaller level” (Renford, 2005).

This change often happens at the Coalition’s regular Wednesday night meetings, held at its office every week during the season. Here, popular education, collective analysis and reflection are put into practice. As CIW organizer Gerardo Reyes Chavez notes, “at the meetings each Wednesday it is an exchange of experiences. It is not a class to see who knows more. It is a class where we all know and we all learn from everyone. We are all students and we are all teachers in a certain way. People understand the principle that we are all leaders (Gonzalez, 2005: 20). This sentiment echoes Freire: “no one teaches another, nor is anyone self-taught. People teach each other, mediated by the world...” (Freire, 1993: 61).

The CIW conducts consciousness-raising not only at open weekly membership meetings and *formaciones*, but also through its own low-power FM radio station *Radio Conciencia*, or “Radio Consciousness.” The Coalition’s radio station features live programming throughout much of the day, regular programming in the Mayan languages Mam and Qanjobal, children’s programming, music, nationally-syndicated news with a focus on Latino and Latin American issues, and recorded “shout-outs” from social justice organizations from southern California to Southern Mexico. Interwoven throughout the programs are provocative questions and discussions intended to raise consciousness, calls from listeners, discussions about rights at the workplace, and important announcements from the Coalition about upcoming events and meetings. Hosts are farmworkers—some CIW staff as well as other members. Any member can become a radio host. “In our programs,” an outreach pamphlet for the radio declares, “we talk about our struggle for higher wages in Spanish and our indigenous languages.”

The popular education and consciousness-raising organizing style utilized by the Coalition is perhaps best summed up in its motto “*Consciousness Plus Commitment Equals Change.*” Benitez explains,

What we do basically with our education is the ‘three Cs.’ The popular education has to complete this equation: C + C = C... Our community [is] familiar with popular education. They practiced it in Guatemala during the conflict, in Haiti during Aristide. It was really important. It was the roots. And here it’s the roots of the Coalition. Because when you’re just arriving from your country, you find yourself with an organization that doesn’t have a leader, that you can express yourself—You’re not going to show up at a meeting and find that Gerardo or Lucas is talking. Instead, Gerardo, Mateo, and myself are *motivating*... We say, look, these are the tools that we have in the Coalition, and you’re invited if you want to organize... We motivate people so that they can motivate others and organize themselves (GlobalLocalPopEd, 2005).

Reyes-Chavez elaborates, “Consciousness Plus Commitment Equals Change. When we do different events, different actions, when we reflect on our existence and the work that we do here, we understand that in order to make changes outside that you can see in the papers, that you can see and hear about, the change starts within us—within our minds, in our hearts...” (Young and Stelzer, 2005).

The CIW’s leadership development “draw[s] on the innate leader that exists in every worker” (Solnit, 2005: 38). The CIW states, “we strive to build our strength as a community on a basis of reflection and analysis... and an ongoing investment in leadership development to help workers from the base of our community continually develop their skills in community education and organization” (CIW, 2005f). For the same structural reasons that make popular education a constant necessity, so is constant leadership development necessary to ensure a strong base of leaders, educators, and organizers who are also farmworkers to carry on the struggle. Leary notes, “the CIW is absolutely masterful at leadership development, creatively using popular education... These workers have a sense of identity as workers, understand the structure and nature of the fast-food industry and their place in it, and understand and can articulate a world view. That worldview is shaped by Zapatismo, rather than socialism<sup>8</sup>... connect[ing] the dots between immigration, war, and globalization” (Leary, 2005).

Membership and leadership positions are open to all. Francisca Cortez, for example, is the youngest member of the staff of the Coalition. She was elected to the staff by her fellow workers, as all staff members are, as recognition for her involvement and work with the CIW. A 23-year-old native of Oaxaca in southern Mexico, she became one of the main spokespersons for the Coalition during the Taco Bell Boycott. Rolando Sales, another young staff member, arrived in Immokalee from Guatemala in 2005, and became one of the more visible and active members during the final (2005) “Taco Bell Truth

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<sup>8</sup> This point merits much more discussion than space allows here. The influence of Zapatismo is one of the main points on which the CIW, global justice, and student movements have intersected (See Notes From Nowhere, 2003). In addition, similarities abound between these two movements whose constituents, to a large extent, are similar, each waging a “war against oblivion” (Ross, 2000: Zebedeo, 2005). Indeed, Mesoamerican concepts made famous by the Zapatistas such as “command by obeying,” “listening to the other,” “building a world where many worlds fit,” and “walking at a slower pace” (See Zugman, 2001) have also come to define the struggle of the CIW. These themes are further elaborated in Holloway and Peláez, 1998 and Nash, 2001. These concepts form some of the (literally) “indigenous resources” (see below) brought to the struggle by CIW members.

Tour.”<sup>9</sup> Cortez and Sales, like other CIW staff members, are farmworkers, elected by their fellow workers, receive the average salary of a farmworker for their work with the Coalition (about \$7,500 a year with no benefits), and must work in the fields at least part of the year. They have become leaders through both the explicit (weekend leadership trainings) and implicit leadership development activities built-in to the activities of the Coalition (Truth Tours)—activities undertaken by the CIW for that very purpose.

In order to become a member, Cortez explains, “you have to go to 2 meetings. In the first, you listen to what is being talked about...different themes, but they all have to do with workers, you also learn a bit about what the organization does. You sign up and then you go before the next meeting to take your picture and give your data information and at the next Wednesday meeting, after the meeting you get your card. That is a guarantee that every member that has a card has heard at least 4 hours, which is not a long but a good beginning, about what the Coalition is. It is also something that the general assembly decided for this process to be like this” (Gonzalez, 2005: 39). The yearly general assembly is where membership elects the staff, as Reyes-Chavez explains: “in fact, it is the only meeting of all the meetings, where it is a requirement to be a member of the Coalition because the decisions that will be made have to be made by members who are people who have been in the organization and know how the process is managed and the importance of their voice in the decision-making... It is the only meeting where you do have to have a membership card” (Gonzalez, 2005: 38).

Members are expected to attend the Wednesday meetings and *formaciones*, and membership is a prerequisite for being a host on the radio station and attending national actions such as the yearly Truth Tours, which usually include the participation of around 100 workers each. Although the CIW as of yet does not have a steward system in the traditional sense, members often act as representatives of the organization, helping co-workers to collectively solve grievances and spreading the word about the Coalition. According to Cortez, “being a member means that you take responsibility in the movement, participating and putting your ideas to practice together with the ideas of the others. Being a member does not just mean, ‘I am with the Coalition and the Coalition defends me...’” (Gonzalez, 2005:34).

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<sup>9</sup> National & Regional tours held by CIW members and allies each year over the course of the Taco Bell boycott, aiming to spread awareness about the boycott and conditions in Immokalee to student, faith, labor and community groups and put pressure on Yum!/Taco Bell with large mobilizations at their headquarters.

The CIW's popular education and leadership development ensure that the organization remains participatory and truly worker-led. According to Reyes-Chavez, "there is no one person dictating what will be done. It is true that there are always people who participate more and because they do so sometimes they know more or can more easily express the message they are taking to the media and other places. But in this case, with the Coalition, we all have the same value even if we don't have the same abilities. One way or another we all are all equally important" (Gonzalez, 2005: 20).

This approach by the Coalition keeps the organization from sliding into a scenario where the whims of one or a few charismatic leaders control the organization, as has happened to many social movements in the past. The CIW is an organization that considers "We Are All Leaders" and "the worker is the true expert" to be much more than empty slogans. Again, Reyes-Chavez: "The Coalition has adopted this model because if you want to change a situation in which you are not in then it doesn't make sense. It is like someone coming in with a lot of knowledge and with a studied methodology, and a salary and privilege that no one else will have. And this goes against the idea that we are all leaders because the leader is not the one who knows everything, who has a higher position, the leader is the one who is in the situation and that is living in and still after being in that situation fights with everyone else (Gonzalez, 2005: 36).

This is particularly remarkable when one realizes that the CIW has produced more than one individual who "could probably be the next Cesar Chavez if they wanted to," according to Brian Payne, co-founder of the Student/Farmworker Alliance. "There is no one individual that symbolizes the coalition either to its members or the outside world" (Payne, 2005). As Leary points out, "The FLOC like the UFW<sup>10</sup> was built around the charisma and aura of their principal leaders—Baldemar Velasquez and the late Cesar Chavez. Generally, in FLOC and the UFW, strategy and tactics flow from top to bottom, even as rank and filers are promoted. The CIW, in contrast, can be described as an organization with group-centered leaders where strategies are fully developed at the base. The shortcomings of the FLOC and the UFW have a familiar ring—a number of labor activists have identified them as endemic to the trade union movement." (Leary, 2005).

The CIW's program of popular education and leadership development should allow it to steer clear of the danger of becoming associated with one or a few leaders and

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<sup>10</sup> Farm Labor Organizing Committee and United Farm Workers, AFL-CIO affiliated farmworker unions.

becoming detached from its base in Immokalee. If not, the consequences could be dire: “just as Chavez's strengths manifest themselves in the character of his leadership, so, too, must his weaknesses. Certainly the UFW's somewhat confused sense of its transcending mission—whether to be a trade union or a social movement; whether to focus on narrow economic gains or to pursue broader political goals—reflects in some degree Chavez's personal ambivalence toward both the ultimate purpose of worker organization and the fundamental objective of his own prolonged activism” (Daniel, 2005). Although CIW co-founder Benitez has been called the “Cesar Chavez for the new millennium” (Moffet, 2005), he shies away from such comparisons: “we workers are the charismatic figures... a worker speaking of his own reality, that's the charisma” (McConahay, 2005).

As a result of its 10-plus years of organizing, guided by the key principles outlined above, the CIW has transformed Immokalee from “ground zero” for labor abuses and farmworker exploitation to an internationally-recognized training ground for young working-class leaders and student activists (Smith, 2005), a laboratory of innovative labor, community, student, and global justice organizing. The third main principle of the CIW's philosophy, and one which helps to build and is infused with the other two, is powerful political action. Strikes, hunger strikes, marches, mass convergences, and of course the Taco Bell boycott have been used to advance the cause of farmworkers and raise consciousness and build leadership both within and beyond the ranks of CIW members. The general strikes by the CIW were amongst its most important accomplishments: “strikes have not been specific to one grower but have involved the entire community and have taken on the industry as a whole. This is in part due to the community labor pool structure of the labor market in Immokalee, but also to the CIW's casting of grievances in political as well as economic terms. ... strike actions tend to become events that galvanize the entire community and challenge the basic assumptions of agriculture's oppressive power system” (CIW, 2004: 357).

In November 2003, the CIW was one of the main organizers of the Root Cause march against the FTAA Ministerial in Miami. For the CIW, Root Cause and other large-scale political actions serve to “bolster their base-building organizing campaigns, internally through leadership development and externally through exposure and alliance-building” (Prokosch and LoPresti, 2005). Benitez, explaining how the CIW used popular

education to build consciousness about free trade in the lead-up to the Root Cause march, notes:

We talk in the language of our community, and there were *compañeros* saying, “Shit, I never knew that it was because of this damn thing that I came here”... So, this raised some consciousness. So, what are we going to do about it? The idea of the march was there, and once we decided that we were going in that direction, there was a lot of participation from the communities, from the workers. It was really interesting. The majority of workers that went to Miami had this analysis that they took from the popular education. They took with them two things, their experience and their analysis. The reporter was standing there with her mouth open because here was a farmworker saying, “Look, I’m here because I was a farmer in Mexico, NAFTA totally screwed me, and I don’t want this to happen to my *compañeros* that are farmworkers in Guatemala, Panama, Central and South America (GlobalLocalPopEd, 2005).

The CIW organized and won prior to the Taco Bell boycott, mostly without celebrity endorsements, religious or student support, or large foundation grants. This is not to slight the role played by these allies in the Taco Bell Boycott, nor is it to downplay the way a group such as the CIW strategically forges and manipulates such alliances on its own terms to its own strategically determined ends. Rather, this is to point out that the foundation of the CIW’s work and strength was and remains the community and workforce in Immokalee and its philosophy and methods style of grassroots organizing.

*we came to understand that the root of our problem was located at a much higher level...*  
(Solnit, 2005: 39)

In 2000, the CIW learned that Immokalee-based grower Six L’s had just entered into a long-term relationship with Taco Bell to provide it with tomatoes. By April of 2001, the national boycott of Taco Bell was officially launched. The CIW chose Taco Bell after analyzing the structure of the industry and realizing that large purchasers could use their immense power to improve wages and conditions throughout their supply chain. “The idea of going after the buyers came from a member at a *formación*,” Reyes-Chavez explains. “The idea to boycott came from workers, the idea to focus on Taco Bell came from workers, workers drove the direction of the campaign, speaking from their own experiences within Immokalee and across the country” (Reyes-Chavez, 2005).

In the early stages of the boycott, skeptics doubted its efficacy and suggested the Coalition instead focus on passing legislation or improving regulations. Benitez responds,

“academics say that the state should do this and the state should do that. Sorry, but I disagree. Our problem is that we have two Bushes, one is the president and one is the governor. The government is never going to do anything anytime soon to help farmworkers. The Department of Labor in Florida has one inspector for labor violations for the whole state.” He continues, “so, what we did is pressure the consumers and the corporations and we won the boycott, and as part of this settlement we won an inspector from the corporation that together with the Coalition will monitor labor conditions... this is a real victory, a concrete improvement, and something that has happened now without us having to wait for it from the government” (Benitez, 2005).

From the beginning, the CIW was aware of this and other potential pitfalls of a national boycott campaign. The Coalition explains, “even in the case of the Taco Bell boycott—a form of action that in the past has tended to shift limited organizational resources away from worker organizing to consumer education—the CIW has sought to develop its strategy in such a way as to both ensure broad-based, long-term participation by its members and to contribute to the overall political education process that lies at the foundation of our work” (CIW, 2004: 358). The CIW “believes that changing corporate practice [in the agribusiness/foodservice industries] can only be achieved by a mass movement uniting different groups around a single cause” (Oxfam, 2004: 10). The Taco Bell boycott provided the opportunity for the CIW to reach out and form these alliances and expand and mobilize its base toward the realization of tangible goals.

Throughout the boycott the CIW did not hesitate to talk about class and used its analysis of the industry’s pervasive advertising to attract allies from the global justice, anti-sweatshop and student movements:

This year, Taco Bell announced with great fanfare the launch of a \$220 million advertising campaign... Where did all that money come from? In part, it came straight out of Immokalee, Florida, where our members’ sub-poverty wages and total lack of benefits have allowed tomato growers to control their costs and provide Taco Bell with cheap tomatoes, boosting Taco Bell’s bottom line... farmworkers own a share of the value associated with the Taco Bell brand name, because farmworkers and their families have sacrificed for so many years... so that Taco Bell could continue to buy cheap tomatoes and invest its profits in promoting its brand. In short, Taco Bell’s fast-food profits have been based for years on farmworker poverty (CIW, 2005g).

Commenting on a Truth Tour stop in Memphis, independent journalist Andrew Stelzer notes, “for some of the farmworkers it was their first time speaking in public. The

tour is designed not only to promote the boycott of taco bell and campaign for higher wages and working conditions, but it's an opportunity to develop skills as activists and people" (Stelzer, 2005).

Why and how did the CIW initiate the alliances it did during the boycott? Reaching out to Taco Bell's 18-24-year-old target market (some of whom had been working with the CIW locally in Florida since the 2000 march to Orlando), the Coalition "astutely recogniz[ed] the potential of the energetic anticorporate youth movement" and hoped to tap into this upsurge of organizing and activism (Rosenberg, 2005). As the CIW puts it, "when we went to these groups we weren't asking them to support our work or our campaign, we were asking them to become our allies and to take on the campaign as their own... each group worked autonomously in a decentralized way, but always came back to the center, to the workers, to plan and strategize together" (Solnit, 2005: 39-40).

Near the end of the boycott, even Taco Bell had to admit to the efficacy of the CIW's alliance-building strategy: "they've very strategically reached out to college students as well as church organizations and other groups and we don't like that there are groups of people out there who think we're a bad company and we don't care about the plight of the farmworkers" (Stelzer, 2005).

According to Reyes-Chavez, "the boycott was a mechanism to achieve more systematic change in the industry and put more pressure on growers, and also create consciousness across country about the conditions faced by farmworkers. Change won't happen if we don't go outside and create alliances because no one is going to say 'poor farmworker' or come and help us because they don't understand the conditions." He continues, "but everything starts in Immokalee—an alliance was created with students and then they created their own campaigns. The lead came from the community and decisions made by farmworkers— analyzing the steps that were being taken— there was no outside expert, the expertise came not from an academic point of view but from workers who pick tomatoes every day, whose expertise is very deep" (Reyes-Chavez, 2005).

Looking at the change in rhetoric from Taco Bell over the course of the boycott reveals the power the CIW exercised over it. Less than three years after declaring "we are not now or ever going to get involved in a labor dispute between third parties" and offering Coalition activists jobs at Taco Bell to placate them, Jonathan Blum, Yum! Brands Senior Vice President, stated in March of 2005: "we recognize these workers do

not enjoy the same rights and conditions as employees in other industries, and there is a need for reform” (Grow, 2005; CIW, 2005h). Commenting months before the boycott ended in victory, Reyes-Chavez said, “...they still don’t want to pay one more penny per pound. The reason is, I think is a question of power... they don’t want to seem defeated by a group of farmworkers... if you consider that we are an immigrant community that is formed of about 15,000 workers, and we are people that work from before the sun rises until it’s dark [rendering them “powerless”?], and we are still able to organize a national campaign that is going against... the largest fast food industry on the planet, and you see that the farmworkers were able to bring those executives to the table more than once, then you are gonna consider that a big success” (Stelzer, 2005a).

The boycott victory announced in March 2005 signified unprecedented, concrete gains for about 1,500 farmworkers. The victory improved wages for workers who pick produce purchased by Taco Bell, established an enforcement mechanism insuring that the extra penny per pound is actually being passed on to the workers, and created an enforceable code of conduct in which Taco Bell must cease doing business with any grower found to be abusive of workers. The one-penny-per-pound raise paid by Taco Bell amounts to a wage increase of approximately 75%, and Taco Bell is mandated to open its books to the CIW for it to ensure that the extra penny is being passed on (CIW, 2005h; Leary, 2005). In addition to these concrete improvements, it was also a broader victory for the entire movement that the CIW has mobilized: “A 4-year-long boycott of Taco Bell, an unprecedented strategy of building alliances... had all proved that the movement for global justice could organize without a charismatic leader, could allow groups around the country to work with autonomy, and, most importantly, could win” (Young and Stelzer, 2005).

Evidence of the Coalition’s commitment to its local base include the launching of *Radio Conciencia*—an organizing tool—and the acquisition of a new, expanded community center to strengthen its presence and capacity, both in the thick of the Taco Bell boycott. Reyes-Chavez reminds us, “we won’t stop targeting the contractors and the growers, but we also want to target the corporations who buy the produce” (Lydersen, 2005: 225). From the bloody shirt held aloft in the march on the contractor’s house in 1996, to the hundreds of sweaty shirts stained with a day’s work in the fields draped on the fence surrounding Yum! Brands headquarters during the 2004 Truth Tour, the

symbolism is obvious: the continuity of the struggle and the centrality of the base of workers in everything the Coalition does.

The national boycott campaign against Taco Bell would not have ended in a decisive and precedent-setting victory if not for the interplay and confluence of the CIW and student and faith allies. Neither students nor the CIW, acting on their own, would have forced this giant corporation to cave in. This analysis takes nothing away from the CIW or its ability to organize in the community and workplace and achieve tangible improvements for its membership; on that matter, the CIW's history speaks for itself. Rather, what this does point to is the political sophistication and foresight of the CIW in understanding the industry; its choosing of a target; and its conscious efforts to build alliances on its own terms.<sup>11</sup>

*with [the boycott victory] has come a fundamental shift in worldview, a sense that powerlessness in the country's worst-paid and worst-treated labor force is not inevitable...*  
(McConahay, 2005)

From social movement theorists in the 1970's to contemporary critiques of the workers center model, the notion that those most exploited by capitalism are rendered "powerless" and "unorganizable" has serious implications for progressive and radical social change. Of course, farmworkers in the U.S. confront a myriad of structural barriers to their exercising of social power—undocumented status, the influence of agribusiness on local and federal politics, high turnover and competition amongst workers, a seemingly endless labor supply, and so on. The CIW, however, has shown that workers confronted with these and other structural obstacles, who are the face of exploitation and displacement caused by modern neoliberal capitalism, indeed do have the ability, resources, and wherewithal to organize, fight back, and win.

Jenkins and Perrow attempt to explain farmworker organizing within the framework of Resource Mobilization theory. According to them, the discontent necessary to spark a social movement amongst farmworkers is relatively constant. "What increases, giving rise to insurgency, is the amount of social resources available to unorganized but

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<sup>11</sup> Space prevents a further discussion on this topic, but briefly, the Student/Farmworker Alliance involves students on over 300 college and high school campuses across the country; removed or prevented 22 Taco Bell establishments from campuses during their "Boot the Bell" campaign in solidarity with the CIW; and itself has created dozens of new leaders and organizers as a result of their experiences with CIW solidarity.

aggrieved groups, making it possible to launch an organized demand for change” (Jenkins and Perrow, 1977: 250). They continue,

are deprived groups like farm workers able to sustain challenges, especially effective ones, on their own? We think not... nor, as the history of agricultural strikes amply attests, have farm worker movements proven able to mobilize numbers sufficient to wring concessions from employers. For a successful outcome, movements by the “powerless” require strong and sustained outside support (Jenkins and Perrow, 1977: 251).

McAdam (1999), as well as the experience of the CIW, raise several cogent critiques of these views. The implication of the Jenkins and Perrow hypothesis is clear: extremely oppressed and exploited groups such as farmworkers are too “powerless” and poor to organize a movement on their own, and cannot do so without an infusion of resources from some external source. As McAdam points out, the implication of RM<sup>12</sup> theory is an “implicit assertion of powerlessness on the part of *most segments of the population*” (McAdam, 1999: 22, emphasis added). McAdam quotes one such theorist who states that “one must realize that a negatively privileged minority is in a poor position to initiate a social protest movement through its own efforts alone” (Oberschall, quoted in McAdam, 1999: 21-22). This is, in fact, precisely what the CIW has accomplished.

The main objection to RM theory is not the concept that external “liberals and organized labor” lend support to social movements of the poor, but rather that aggrieved groups are impotent and unable to organize on their own; and that elites are willing to support them (McAdam, 1999: 26-27). These notions need to be further examined.

A major deficiency of the RM approach is its failure to acknowledge that excluded groups can and do have the ability to organize and exercise power. “The importance of elite support is magnified,” McAdam writes, “by the political impotence ascribed to the mass base.” One of the reasons why these groups are seen as impotent is their lack of access to traditional political channels such as voting or money for campaign contributions (McAdam, 1999: 29). Here we can put the theory on its head. It is precisely because farmworkers in Florida are excluded from “traditional channels” that they are forced to resort to community-based organizing with a focus on constant political education. It is in this respect where we see that such supposedly “powerless” groups do indeed have a wealth of resources, if resources are defined in a broader sense. RM

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<sup>12</sup> The Jenkins and Perrow hypothesis will be referred to as *RM*, Resource Mobilization.

theorists never clearly define what they mean by “resources.” McAdam points out that “aggrieved groups possess the ability to exert significant political leverage on their own behalf” due to their possession of certain *indigenous resources* facilitative of organized social protest (McAdam, 1999: 30-31). In the case of the CIW, these indigenous resources—including the forms of resistance brought by members from social movements in their own countries and existing migrant social networks—compensate for, and are deployed precisely due to, their exclusion and marginalization from accepted channels of protest, whether through immigration status, exclusion from the NLRA, extreme poverty and exploitation, exclusion from the mainstream labor movement, and other reasons.

As Benitez points out, “we don't have the money to influence the legislature or the governor. We don't have money to give the big donations like the businesses in this state. All we can do is use the little resources we have—even our own bodies—to make them pay attention to us” (CIW, 2005i).

“In characterizing the majority of such groups as politically impotent,” McAdam continues, “resource mobilization theorists are to be faulted for their failure to acknowledge the power inherent in disruptive tactics... The fact that these groups fail to exercise this potential much of the time *is more often attributable to their shared perception of powerlessness than to any inherent impotence on their part*” (McAdam, 30-31, emphasis added). Enter the CIW and its program of “Consciousness + Commitment = Change”; where supposedly powerless people collectively come to analyze and reflect upon the forces exploiting them and the ways in which they could be collectively confronted.

The role of subjective perception leads us to another general weakness of RM theory. RM posits that grievance and discontent are relatively constant and “external resources” are the variable giving rise to social movements. McAdam points out, however, the problem with such view: “the failure to distinguish *objective* social conditions from their *subjective* perception (McAdam, 1999:33-34). He continues, “the link between objective conditions and action is seldom straightforward... what is absent from most versions of the mobilization perspective is any acknowledgment of the enormous potential for variability in the subjective meanings people attach to their ‘objective’ situations” (McAdam, 1999: 34).

This is not a novel concept; the rich traditions of “western” and “critical” Marxism and their concern with subjective perception arose from the need of militants to explain why revolution had not occurred despite the existence of “objective conditions.” More importantly, we see this reality in the CIW, not based on academic theory but real life experience. How could an extremely exploited group of workers with so many incentives to stay quiet organize such a vibrant social movement? I think the answer lies in the Coalition’s simple equation, “Consciousness + Commitment = Change.” Returning to McAdam, we see that “segments of society may very well submit to oppressive conditions unless that oppression is collectively defined as both unjust and *subject to change*... the individual’s sophisticated capacity for attributing significance to diverse sets of events makes it possible that a wide variety... of circumstances could trigger this process of “cognitive liberation” (McAdam, 34), or, as the CIW would refer to it, *concientización*. As CIW member Marcelino Hernandez puts it, “the worker who does not analyze remains a slave.”

Returning to the subject of resources, Marshall Ganz points out that “the abundance of internal resources to which well-established groups have access may make it harder to innovate by making it easier for them to keep doing the same thing wrong. New groups... often lack conventional resources, but the richness of their strategic capacity—aspects of their leadership and organization...—can offset this.” Such groups “make intractable problems actionable by holding out the possibility of change” and demonstrate that “[p]eople can generate the power to resolve grievances not only if those with power decide to use it on their behalf, but also if they can develop the capacity to out think and outlast their opponents—a matter of leadership and organization. As students of ‘street smarts’ have long understood, ‘resourcefulness’ can sometimes compensate for a lack of resources” (Ganz, 2000: 1043-1044). This sentiment is echoed by Louie: “workers’ centers [such as the CIW] are a bit like small guerilla warriors fighting a more heavily armed opponent. They are relatively small, lack resources, and fight class forces with considerably more firepower... [they] are flexible, move quickly, maximize limited resources, organize ‘outside of the box,’ and utilize tactics and strategies based on their ethnic backgrounds... techniques that deflect and toss their more powerful opponents’ weight back at them” (Louie, 2001: 218).

Rather than ossified relics of a bygone era, some of the assumptions of RM theory and the “powerlessness” of exploited groups still find traction today. In particular, a reading of Jenkins’ (2002) critique of the workers center model of organizing through the lens of the CIW reveals this. While Jenkins is not writing specifically from an RM viewpoint, the similarities are striking. Because certain workers are intrinsically unable to exercise “social power,” in Jenkins’ view, any attempt on their behalf to organize is futile. It’s interesting to note how smoothly Jenkins’ views gel with the “old” AFL-CIO notions of poor immigrant workers as “unorganizable” ostensibly due to their immigration status or nontraditional conditions of employment, but actually due to the labor movement’s own racism and xenophobia. I think this needs to be further unpacked in light of the experience of the CIW.

Jenkins is correct in critiquing what he refers to the “advocacy model” of nonprofit organizations. It is important to note, however, that much of Jenkins’ critique has little or no bearing on the CIW, and I think this is evidence of the Coalition’s uniqueness, even when compared to other workers centers.<sup>13</sup> Simply put, there is no rigid distinction in the CIW between “staff” and “members.” The Coalition does not have “professional staff” or “professional organizers” brought in from the outside. Jenkins’ opening sentence is quite telling: “*progressive activists* are increasingly stressing the importance of organizing and ‘building power’ *for* oppressed groups.” (Jenkins, 2002, emphasis added). As Cortez points out, “the Coalition is different from unions in that unions are always looking for professionals whose profession is to organize the people” (Gonzalez, 2005: 24). *Del pueblo y para el pueblo* (“Of the people and for the people”) is more than a slogan for the CIW, it is its reality and the basis of its organizing.

A second overarching critique of Jenkins is that he has analyzed workers in New York City’s garment industry, declared them “powerless,” and falsely extrapolated this designation onto all workers who turn toward the workers center organizing model or find themselves in nontraditional conditions of employment. I think this seriously limits his argument. Nevertheless, much of what Jenkins has to say about “powerlessness” and “objective conditions” is worth examining.

Jenkins points out that instead of worrying about the internal staff-member

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<sup>13</sup> To his credit, Jenkins does mention in passing: “some workers centers such as the Coalition of Imokolee [sic] Workers in Florida have achieved significant material increases for their members.”

dynamics of organizing campaigns, activists should instead be asking: “Is it possible to organize workers in small subcontracted garment shops into collective bargaining units? Do those factories have sufficient financial resources to sustain higher salaries or benefits? Do the factory owners rent or own their equipment? Are there any unions interested in organizing in the garment industry?... What impact will demonstrations have on factories located in industrial neighborhoods?” (Jenkins, 2002). Based on the experience of the CIW, there is another set of questions: Is a collective bargaining unit necessarily the best way for these workers to organize? Can the final purchasers of the clothing be pressured to improve wages? If farmworkers in southwest Florida had waited for a union to come around, they would still be earning pre-1980 wages and suffering violence in the fields. In fact, as the Coalition rose to prominence, the UFW wanted to absorb it and FLOC was at times openly hostile to it. Had the CIW joined the UFW, the Taco Bell boycott, as it was conducted, would have been illegal. Jenkins’ implication seems to be if people are working under extreme exploitation and a web of contractors and subcontractors, they shouldn’t bother organizing because any such efforts will fail.

Jenkins also states, “any person or group’s ability to change the circumstances of their lives depends on specific conditions that exist outside their own heads. These ‘objective’ conditions may include the number of people involved in the organizing, the type of work they perform in society, the financial resources they have, the strength of their allies, the power of the forces they are confronting, and the changes being sought” (Jenkins, 2002). The experience of the CIW shows this to be only *partially* true. Jenkins ignores the subjective conditions necessary for successful organizing, which have already been examined above. Before examining why this may be, I want to point out more assumptions by Jenkins which need to be further examined.

Jenkins writes that the desire to see all oppressed people as potentially powerful is “idealistic” and that “consequently, it is understandable that many organizers committed to social justice will work with the ‘most oppressed’: low-income community residents, welfare recipients, immigrant workers, or foster care youth,” even though such groups lack the independent social power to force the changes they desire (Jenkins, 2002). Although it is understandable what Jenkins means by “the difficulty of organizing in situations where the workers cannot exercise social power,” one has to wonder if there are many groups in society more exploited and (seemingly) more lacking in social power than

farmworkers. Yet the members and leadership of the CIW are not superhuman, if they could organize, surely other “powerless” groups also could.

Jenkins continues, “in deciding which campaigns to initiate, we must face the fact that there are tradeoffs between working with the most powerless constituencies and having member-led organizations or campaigns. Campaigns can only be controlled by the membership to the degree that they find their motive power in the knowledge and activities of the members. In order to develop this power, it is critical that all organizing work begin with a clear understanding of the objective conditions that will shape a given campaign” (Jenkins, 2002). Is Jenkins implying that “the most powerless constituencies” are incapable of waging member-led campaigns, that they lack sufficient knowledge and understanding of their own circumstances to organize to change them? If one takes this view, then it is understandable why Jenkins frames the issue as one of “progressive activists” organizing “for” “powerless” groups.

I think Freire and the CIW particularly speak to this issue. Freire points out that “one of the most objectionable errors of political militants, especially those of the messianically authoritarian kind, has always been a total ignorance of grassroots comprehension of the world. Seeing themselves as bearers of the ‘truth’ that no one can refuse, they regard their sublime task as one not of proposing such truth for consideration but of imposing it without question” (Freire, 1998: 77). In the CIW, the bearers of “truth” are the workers themselves, and the organization is set up to allow for workers to teach and learn from each other. Speaking about the Taco Bell boycott, Reyes-Chavez explains, “the lead came from the community and decisions made by farmworkers, analyzing the steps that were being taken. There was no outside expert, the expertise came not from an academic point of view but from workers who pick tomatoes every day, whose expertise is very profound.” (Reyes-Chavez, 2005).

A college-educated professional designating with a wave of the hand what groups of workers deserve to organize and what groups don’t, as well as the related notions of some in the labor movement that it is more strategic to focus on organizing workers in more “important” sectors such as logistics and communication, are notions that need to be further problematized, especially in light of the racist and exclusionary history of the American labor movement. I think the CIW’s experience serves to prove false many of

the assumptions made about “powerless” workers and serves as an inspiration and possible model to other workers in similar circumstances.

Jenkins’ rigid focus on objective conditions “that exist outside of people’s heads,” whether stemming from his politics or from a U.S.-centric notion of organizing, ignores the tactics and philosophy of many “powerless” groups that often build social power by first addressing subjective issues of perception and “consciousness.” As Asbed points out, “most U.S. organizing is only tangentially about consciousness—the Alinsky model, which is still the primary model in use in most of US organizing work, sees any change of consciousness as the by-product of organizing action, while the primary focus of the organizers and members of any organization is fixed on concrete, winnable change” (Gonzalez, 2005: 15).

I think Reyes-Chavez is worth quoting at length as a juxtaposition to Jenkins:

Unions have a lot of advantages because they are a part of a structure that is in many areas of the country. They have influence in legislation but at the same time we base our model of organizing on consciousness. In thinking of what could be considered a disadvantage because of the conditions in Immokalee and the difficulty of having a union with all these conditions, where you won’t work under a contract, we take this situation, which in theory is a disadvantage, and convert it into an advantage... In our case, we are directing our struggle... A union organizes workers; it doesn’t organize itself together with the workers. We organize between all of us... we believe that consciousness is the base that moves any worker anywhere. First we plant the question: “What forces are oppressing me?” And then we search for answers but together with other workers in the same situation... I don’t think there are many movements in this country that make that your question. There are many movements that fight against a force that oppresses a sector of the population but they don’t have the specific population or workers ask the question, analyze the question, and take action for themselves. This is something that is different. We fight against many forces that oppress us and despite knowing all the limitations we have, we are taking our message to many people in the country and we are creating, here in Immokalee, a base of leadership that will not only stay in Immokalee, but that goes anywhere where there are members of the Coalition that understand that the Coalition is not a building with 4 walls or the members of the staff or the people who do house visits to talk about human rights, but that the leadership that comes out of the Immokalee is people who know that they are the Coalition and that without them the Coalition is nothing... so wherever there is a worker with a consciousness that has been in Immokalee and has been a part of this movement, there is a part of the Coalition in that place... We did not do it alone or using a traditional way organizing and this is why we know that consciousness is the base of everything. It is consciousness that has involved thousands of students across the country. It is consciousness that has made millions of people of faith, of different denominations, to endorse the boycott. It is consciousness that ensures that every time there is an abuse in any place and there is a worker who has heard about the importance of consciousness, does something, they make a report

or find a solution. They don't just see the abuse and keep it. There is that difference. We are doing something that in theory would be unthinkable... All of this is due to our way of organizing, getting out of the traditional. If the way of organizing traditionally was a place it would be a "corral" with tall walls where you know that you can go from one corner to the other but you know that outside these boundaries there is nothing. The way we organize is that we know these boundaries exist and that they exist when we don't think about what is beyond or that the dreams we have are impossible to reach; when we think only about strategy but we don't imagine bigger things than what has been achieved in a traditional way... we have the understanding that we are going to win and that this is a matter of time (Gonzalez, 2005: 55-58).

Far from being based on idealism, the CIW's methods bring out the knowledge and leadership buried in each worker: "The Wednesday meetings are about raising consciousness, that's what moves people. Not only knowing that you are poor and that things should change, but also analyzing your own thinking about things which before seemed normal, like the charity on Thanksgiving. The point of the meetings is to question yourself about things you were thinking and had accepted—they bring up questions that previously weren't in your mind before you knew about organizing and fighting back... The answer comes from within, and includes the solution to the problem: Why are we so poor? Who is profiting? The answer is struggle (Reyes-Chavez, 2005).

From the heart of Immokalee these supposedly "unorganizable" and "powerless" workers have organized and built power for themselves for more than a decade. In the process they have improved wages and working conditions for some of the country's most nakedly exploited workers, defeated the world's largest fast-food corporation, and spearheaded a vibrant, national social movement. The CIW proves that "powerlessness" is not intrinsic or inevitable.

*In one telling moment, CIW member Gerardo Reyes-Chavez spoke of the changes that the CIW and its struggle had brought about, stating that the industry and mega corporations such as Yum! could no longer exploit farmworkers with impunity once confronted with what he called la verdad de nuestra existencia—literally, "the truth of our existence." This phrase immediately hit me as having a double meaning—there is the reality of the day-to-day life of a farmworker, the story of which CIW members used to gain allies and support across the country— but it also refers to something much more basic: The reality that we exist (Rodrigues, 2005: 77).*

Like the *campesino* in Arcadio Hidalgo's verse, farmworkers in the U.S. today are overlooked, or at least were before the CIW. Indeed, farmworkers share much in common with millions of other workers from the global south performing some of the most

dangerous, lowest-paying and necessary labor at the margins of the U.S. economy (and, with some exceptions, the U.S. labor movement). Rather than passive victims, however, these workers who plant, harvest and pack the food that ends up on our tables; care for the sick, young and elderly; build, clean and maintain the buildings we live and work in; make daily life possible for other working as well as middle-class people; and subsidize the billion-dollar profits of corporations with their labor and poverty, are organizing for improved wages, working conditions, and basic dignity. In some cases, such as the CIW, their philosophy and dedication to worker-led organizing has led them to impressive victories and provided a model for other groups organizing for social transformation. These workers have won these victories despite often being excluded from the legal protections enjoyed by other workers.<sup>14</sup>

The struggle of the CIW is larger than a simple union or labor struggle—it is a human rights struggle, a racial justice and immigrant rights struggle; it is a struggle over free trade, neoliberalism, and U.S. imperialism in *América*. Perhaps this calls into question how applicable the CIW model and experience is for other labor and community organizations. Surely, the migratory agricultural laborer experience is quite unique, as is the situation of Immokalee as a virtual “labor pool” with thousands of workers living within blocks of the center of town, almost none of them bound to any particular employer on more than a daily or weekly basis.

The following example further illustrates the uniqueness of the Coalition and the conditions it struggles against. In front of a standing-room-only crowd during the weekend of the School of the Americas protest in Ft. Benning, Georgia, Coalition members Francisca Cortez and Gerardo Reyes-Chavez give a presentation on the realities of the migrant farmworker, using large painted scenes on banners to illustrate their different points. Drawings depict the Mexico-U.S. border crossing; workers leaving their families behind; and suffering in the fields of Florida. At the end of the presentation, a scene of a smiling family sitting together on a beach is shown. Cortez and Reyes-Chavez ask the crowd how many own a swimsuit. Most of the people in the room raise their hands. Reyes-Chavez explains that when this question is asked in a room full of farmworkers, few if any people raised their hands. None of them are able to afford trips

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<sup>14</sup> See Chang, 2000; Gordon, 2005; Griffith, Craig, Kissam & Camposeco, 1995; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001; Louie, 2001; Lydersen, 2005a; Mathew, 2005; Riley, 2002; Salazar-Parreñas, 2001.

to the beach, and even if they could, their families aren't around to accompany them. Cortez explains how 600 family farmers are displaced in Mexico every day as a result of policies such as NAFTA, and states boldly that "we didn't want to leave our countries and families to come here to be peons, but we had to," shattering the "immigrant in pursuit of the American Dream" mythology.

Is this reality, however, unique to the farmworkers of the CIW? Biju Mathew, writing about immigrant taxi drivers in New York City, explains that the experience of the single immigrant worker in the U.S. can be "significantly empty of the more enduring signifiers of a meaningful life—love, intimacy, emotional attachments, and the sensual" (Mathew, 2005: 174). The Coalition helps to fill some of these voids and build a sense of community. This "fragmentation of lives," Mathew continues, is something the labor movement must provide an alternative to "if it is to be a sustainable grassroots movement" (Mathew, 2005: 175). This fragmentation, obviously, is more acute for those who have been uprooted from their land, culture, indigenous languages, and family. But there is an element of it that all workers in a late capitalist, individualistic and competitive society suffer. The labor movement would indeed be wise to propose and build alternatives to this reality. Perhaps the CIW experience can provide some insight.

While it is true that the Immokalee workers confront a particularly insidious web of exploitation, work overall is becoming more informalized and more subcontracted. In this regard farmworkers are like a canary in the mine, blazing a path that others may find it necessary to follow in the future.

The CIW must continue to strike the delicate balance between building leadership and consciousness from the base with continued community/workplace organizing while strengthening and expanding alliances and their national movement to reform the agricultural and foodservice industries.

Judging by the size of Immokalee, with its 4 or 5 traffic lights, it can be difficult to fathom how many people and organizations across the country have heard of and continue to participate in solidarity with the struggle the Coalition is leading. The CIW has animated the consciousness of thousands of sub-poverty-wage agricultural workers in southwest Florida; spearheaded a national movement which has left an indelible mark on the history of organizing and grassroots social change in the U.S.; and have done so through their base of young immigrant workers in the belly of the anti-labor south.

Reyes-Chavez symbolizes the change brought about by the Coalition when he states, “the only thing we know for sure is that we are not willing to cross our arms seeing how our future has been stolen from us. We are determined to build this future and we know we are not alone, so the fight is promised” (Shannon and Stelzer, 2005).

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