

## Florida farmworkers take aim at McDonald's

By Tom Brown/Reuters

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IMMOKALEE, Florida (Reuters) - A coalition of migrant farmworkers is taking its fight against wages that leave U.S. tomato pickers in deep poverty to the home of McDonald's Corp., the world's largest restaurant company.

The Coalition of Immokalee Workers, comprised mostly of Mexican and Guatemalan immigrants and based in this hardscrabble town in the middle of South Florida's farm country, came to prominence in the 1990s by exposing a series of farmworker abuse and human trafficking cases.

The group's real claim to fame came in March 2005, however, when it won an unlikely agreement with fast-food chain Taco Bell and its parent Yum! Brands (YUM.N) to pay a penny more per pound of tomatoes. Yum! agreed to the hike after a four-year boycott but coalition leaders hope to avoid such a stiff fight in the case of McDonald's. Instead, they say high-profile protests like two planned for next month -- coupled with McDonald's (MCD.N) brand recognition and often repeated adherence to "corporate responsibility" -- will shame it into matching the Yum! deal.

If the coalition gets a so-called "pattern" agreement with the undisputed U.S. fast-food king, the hope is that the whole fast food industry will follow, giving a big boost to workers whose wages have essentially been stagnant for 30 years.

"This could create a domino effect," coalition activist Gerardo Reyes, a 29-year-old native of Zacatecas, Mexico, told Reuters in a recent interview.

"It could be the trigger that puts the whole fast-food industry in motion," said Reyes.

On April 13, the coalition will stage demonstrations outside McDonald's corporate headquarters in Oak Brook, Illinois. A day later it will lead a march through downtown Chicago, culminating in a rally under the "Golden Arches" at McDonald's flagship restaurant in the Windy City.

"A lot of people are organizing this," said Reyes. "It's going to be a very big crowd."

### 71 PERCENT SOLUTION

A penny a pound increase for tomatoes may seem like chump change for burger behemoth McDonald's. The hike could make a big difference for the tomato pickers of Florida, however. The state, which has a long history of miserable conditions for farmworkers, is the source of more than 90 percent of the fresh winter tomatoes produced in the United States.

Largely working on small individually owned farms, tomato pickers are currently paid about 45 cents for every 32-pound (14.5 kg) bucket of the fruit they pick, with no rights to overtime pay or any other job benefits. A penny more for each bucket would raise the pay rate to 77 cents, handing the workers a hefty 71-percent increase in wages.

At the current wage rate, a worker has to pick nearly 2 tons of tomatoes daily to make \$50 -- or harvest 181 pounds to be able to afford a "Big Mac" sandwich at a Miami McDonald's. The coalition says a reasonable worker can pick about 2 tons of tomatoes on a good day.

"What we're asking for is possible because Taco Bell is already doing it and it works," said Reyes. "It's only fair because every worker has the right to a decent wage." Taco Bell has said the pay increase costs it just \$100,000 a year.

McDonald's declined to comment on the coalition's demands, saying only in a statement that it was "an advocate for working with suppliers and producers to help improve the standards for Florida's tomato workers."

While actively seeking to bring this about, the statement added that "suppliers need to demonstrate plans to improve and enhance the economic welfare of farm workers who pick tomatoes for McDonald's."

A study commissioned by McDonald's last year found that Florida's tomato pickers earned a wage of up to \$18.27 per hour at one grower's Florida farm.

The study has been widely criticized as inaccurate in a state where median farmworker income was \$7.26 per hour in 2005. In order to achieve it, a worker would also have to pick 1,299 pounds (589 kg) of tomatoes, more than half a ton, per hour.

But it was cited by McDonald's rival Burger King Corp. (BKC.N) last week as a reason for rejecting the call for a penny per pound increase.

"What seems so odd is that Burger King is now resurrecting a totally discredited study," said Bruce Nissen, director of the Research Institute on Social and Economic Policy at Florida International University.