

Why a penny a pound matters

Southwest Florida's tomato industry affects many pockets

Florida's tomato economy is a complex, competitive, sometimes contentious web of relationships. Stakeholders may depend on one another for survival, but those alliances aren't always comfortable. Challenges for growers include rising fuel costs, foreign competition and hurricanes. Pickers face stagnant wages, grueling physical conditions and irregular work. Fast-food corporations confront protests, boycotts and public opinion. The essential, unifying element? The consumer. "Tomato production may be hidden from you, but you're eating the product of this system," says Mary Bauer, director of the Immigrant Justice Project of the Southern Poverty Law Center. "I have confidence that the American people want better than this."

Because all of Florida's tomatoes (save a few experimental plots) are hand-harvested, the industry employs between 15,000 and 33,000 workers in season. Most are young men, generally immigrants from Mexico and Central America. Most are married and/or have children, but work forces them to live apart from their families. By the time a migrant farmworker child is 12 years old, he or she may work in the fields up to 18 hours a week. Farm work is consistently named one of the most dangerous jobs in the nation, with the highest rate of toxic chemical injuries and skin disorders of any in the country. For their work, tomato pickers average about \$10,000 a year, with no right to overtime or to bargain collectively.

Editor's note: The various groups involved in the growing, harvesting and distribution of tomatoes are illustrated here with symbols that we based on loteria, a game of chance similar to bingo that is popular in many Latin cultures. Loteria typically employs 54 cards featuring images sometimes used in other games, as well as in fortune telling.

SOURCES: U.S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR, MIGRANT EDUCATION NEWS, COALITION OF IMMOKALEE WORKERS, MARY BAUER, SOUTHERN POVERTY LAW CENTER, THE COALITION OF IMMOKALEE WORKERS, NATIONAL CENTER FOR FARMWORKER HEALTH, THE FLORIDA TOMATO COMMITTEE, INTER-AMERICAN DEVELOPMENT BANK, FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF BUSINESS AND PROFESSIONAL REGULATION



ILLUSTRATIONS BY CLAY SISK/THE NEWS-PRESS



ACTIVISTS

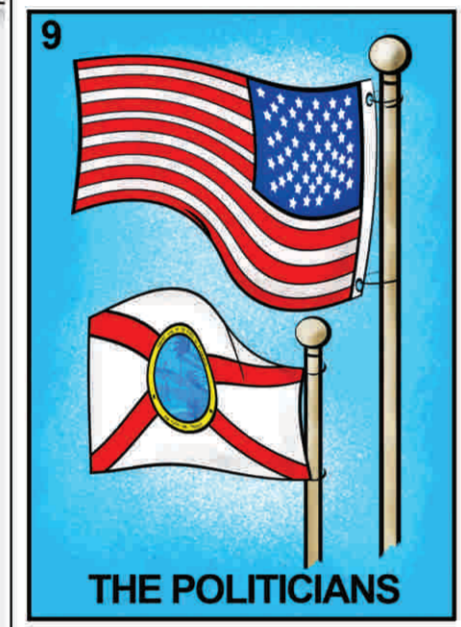
Some, like Gerardo Chavez, are former farmworkers. Some, like Marc Rodrigues, are college students-turned-organizers. Others, like retiree Ely O'Brien, are led by faith. Whatever the spark, the activists span the generations and the nation. "I've want farm work — one of the hottest, most difficult, most dangerous jobs this country has to offer — to be less degrading and more dignified ... then we have to raise the pay workers earn when they are working."

— Lucas Benitez, co-founder of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers



FOLKS AT HOME

Most of the people who pick tomatoes in Florida's fields do so in order to send money back home — often to Mexico, Guatemala or Haiti. Though exact numbers aren't available, it's estimated that about half of Florida's Latinos send money home regularly, to the tune of about \$3.1 billion a year.



THE POLITICIANS

Although no Florida legislators have used their clout to help the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, a number of Northern lawmakers have. Chief among them is U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., who held hearings in April on farmworker labor conditions. Another supporter is former President Jimmy Carter, who helped frang the deal between the coalition and McDonald's. The coalition also works closely with the U.S. Department of Justice on slavery and human trafficking cases.

"It's terribly important that we have the cooperation of the growers to make this work."

— U.S. Sen. Bernie Sanders



FAST FOOD CORPORATIONS

After the Coalition of Immokalee Workers staged a four-year boycott of Taco Bell, fast-food giant Yum! Brands agreed to pay Florida tomato pickers a penny more per pound in 2005. McDonald's followed in 2007. Burger King did in May, adding another half-cent to encourage grower participation. Hold-outs include Wendy's, Subway and Chipotle. "Customers would want us to be part of the solution and help these workers ... (it) was simply a matter of good corporate social responsibility."

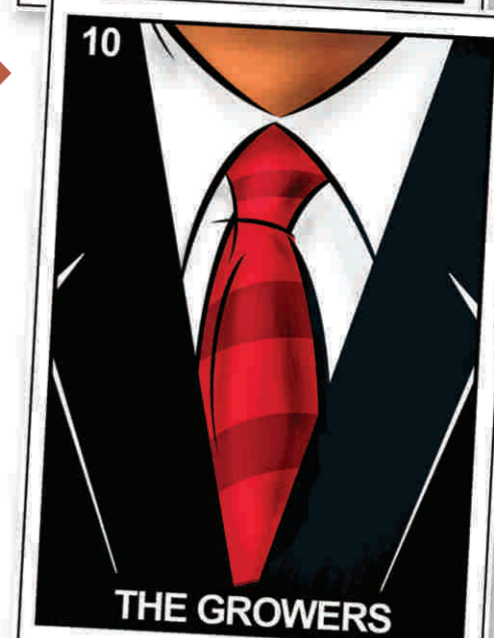
— Jonathan Blum, Senior Vice President of Yum! Brands, Inc.



COUNTER ACTIVISTS

The Coalition of Immokalee Workers discovered that unlicensed private investigator Cam Schaffler posed as a college student in order to learn the group's plans. Then two Burger King executives were fired after Internet comments vilifying the coalition were traced to corporate headquarters and to former BK V.P. Steven Groves, who used his middle school daughter's screen name to disparage the group. "The CIM is an attack organization lining the leaders' pockets ... (it) had the people protesting don't have a clue regarding the facts. A bunch of fools!"

— Steven Groves writing online as surfkahole36

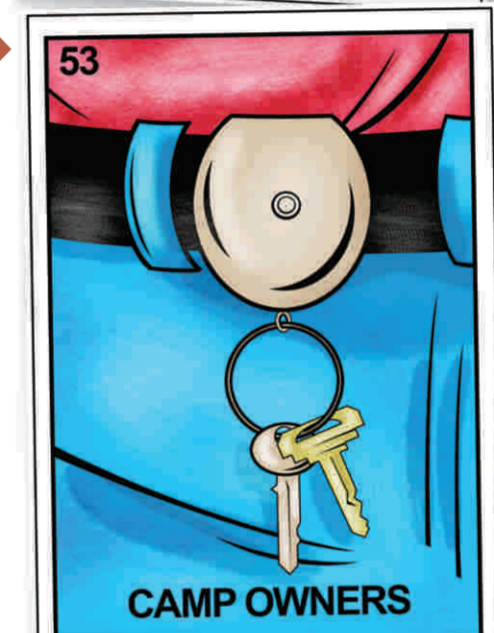


THE GROWERS

Florida produces more than 90 percent of the nation's winter tomatoes — worth some \$600 million annually. The industry is consolidating: 15 years ago, the Florida Tomato Committee had 300 members; today about 75 members own typically huge acreages. Ninety percent of them belong to the Florida Tomato Growers Exchange, which opposes efforts to get fast-food companies to increase workers' wages.

"It would not be rational, reasonable or in the best interest of the growers to join the program."

— FTGE executive vice president Reggie Brown in U.S. Senate testimony



CAMP OWNERS

For some pickers, the growers are their landlords. Often, however, they share dilapidated trailers or substandard company bunkhouses. Last year, a federal judge ruled that tomato giant Ag-Mart failed to provide adequate housing for nearly 2,000 workers. "There was a) general lack of cooking facilities and refrigerators ... facilities for washing and drying clothes were not provided ... separate toilet and shower facilities for each sex were not provided ... in some rooms, there were insufficient beds and workers were forced to sleep on the floor."

— Florida Middle District Circuit Judge Henry Lee Adams writing about the case



THE PICKERS

Labor contractors recruit pickers, take them to the fields, oversee their work and often give them their pay. One who became notorious in the late 1990s was Abel Cuello of Immokalee, sentenced to 33 months in federal prison for enslaving workers. He went back to work for corporate tomato giant Ag-Mart as a contractor in 2005. Ag-Mart later banned Cuello. His Florida license was denied in 2006 but his wife, Yolanda, keeps hers current.

"It's her discretion who she hires, but he's not allowed on company property."

— Ag-Mart spokesman David Sheon in a 2005 interview with The News-Press



LABOR CONTRACTORS