

Background on the Coalition of Immokalee Workers' (CIW) agreement with Taco Bell®

In 2001, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) launched the first-ever farmworker boycott of a major fast-food company, Taco Bell. The national boycott called on Taco Bell to take responsibility for human rights abuses in the fields where its produce is grown and picked. Taco Bell's owner, Yum Brands is the world's largest restaurant company pooling the buying power of five major chain brands (Pizza Hut, KFC, Taco Bell, Long John Silver, and A&W Restaurants). Yum brands has been exerting a downward pressure on wages and working conditions in their supplier's operations by demanding the lowest possible prices.

The CIW's boycott of Taco Bell boycott gained tremendous student, religious, labor, and community support over the past three years. Boycott committees were established in nearly all 50 states. A fast-growing movement to "Boot the Bell" was created in college and high school campuses across the country. The CIW's 10-day hunger strike outside of Taco Bell headquarters in Irvine, CA was one of the largest hunger strikes in US labor history. Over 75 farmworkers and students fasted during the 10-day period. The central question posed to Taco Bell executives during the strike was "Can Taco Bell guarantee its customers that the tomatoes in its tacos were not picked by forced labor?"

At the beginning of March, 2005 Taco Bell Corp., a division of Yum! Brands, agreed to work with the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW), to address the wages and working conditions of farmworkers in the Florida tomato industry.

On March 8 Taco Bell announced that it will fund a penny per pound "pass-through" with its suppliers of Florida tomatoes, and will undertake joint efforts with the CIW on several fronts to improve working conditions in Florida's tomato fields. In return, CIW agreed to end its three-year boycott of Taco Bell, saying that the agreement "sets a new standard of social responsibility for the fast-food industry."

CIW also claims that the agreement makes an immediate material change in the lives of workers. Lucas Benitez, a leader of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers claims that "[s]ystemic change to ensure human rights for farmworkers is long-overdue." He called on Boycott participants to "join the CIW and end their boycott of Taco Bell, and to recognize the Company by supporting its ongoing leadership in our fight against human rights abuses. But our work together is not done. Now we must convince other companies that they have the power to change the way they do business and the way workers are treated."

The CIW, a community-based worker organization composed of mostly Latino, Haitian, and Mayan Indian immigrants working low wage jobs throughout the state of Florida, began organizing in 1993. In its early days, CIW combined community-wide work stoppages with intense public pressure (including three general strikes, a month-long hunger strike by six members in 1998, and a 230-mile march from Ft. Myers to Orlando in 2000). In only five years of organizing CIW had won industry-wide raises of 13-25% (which meant several million dollars annually for the community in increased wages) and political and social respect from the outside world.

Though the raises earned in 1998 were significant, tomato picking piece-rates had fallen so low, that the raises brought the tomato picking piece-rate back to pre-1980 levels, while workers' wages remained below poverty level. At the same time CIW discovered that the phenomenon of modern-day slavery was establishing a foothold in Florida's fields. The CIW continued to organize for fairer wages while it turned attention to attacking involuntary servitude in Florida and helped to free over 500 workers from debt bondage by bringing three modern-day slavery operations to justice from 1997-2000.

Read the press release and other news about the boycott's end at: <http://www.ciw-online.org/news.html>