

Bringing a Living Wage to the Farm

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Poverty wages for farmworkers were the problem. As Dick Nogaj figured it, blueberries were the answer. On vacation in southwest Florida in 1997, Nogaj and his wife Florence heard about a hunger strike by migrant workers in Immokalee, an agricultural town 35 miles inland from Ft. Myers. The Nogajs immediately drove to Immokalee. They were appalled at how hard the tomato and citrus pickers worked and how little they got in return. The average farmworker in the area, according to [researchers at the University of Florida](#), brings home from the fields an annual income of between \$6,500 and \$7,000.

To boost these wages, Dick Nogaj put his faith in consumers. "We can end poverty in the agricultural sector if only 10 percent of the public pays 10 percent more for their food," he says. That's where blueberries entered the picture. The market for the anti-oxidant-rich fruit was growing, particularly among Florida retirees. A variety capable of prospering in south Florida would allow Nogaj to dominate the market for at least a month and possibly two, between the fading of Chilean imports and the ripening of more northern varieties. Higher prices for spring blueberries could translate into higher wages for farmworkers.

In 1999, having recently sold his Illinois engineering firm to its employees, Nogaj invested millions of dollars to turn 36 acres of Immokalee's sandy soil into a blueberry farm. He took a risk on a new variety developed by University of Florida researchers. He waited two seasons before harvesting the first crop.

These "leaps of faith" were motivated by Nogaj's experience with Habitat for Humanity and a personal philosophy that is equal parts progressive Christianity and solid Midwestern liberalism. Today, he boasts of paying his workers \$8.50 an hour, two dollars above Florida's minimum wage, and his piece-rate pickers as much as \$12 to \$14 an hour. Nogaj thinks his blueberries, on sale at Whole Foods and other outlets, represent a new model for agriculture in Florida and nationwide.

Yet much has changed betwixt blueprint and blueberries. Nogaj had high hopes for federal legislation to provide tax incentives for growers who paid living wages. "But then, 30 days after our visit to Washington, Sept. 11 happened, and we haven't gotten an audience in Congress since," he laments.

The problems were not just legislative. It was initially difficult to get the mix of soil right for the finicky berries. Last fall, Hurricane Wilma uprooted 10,000 bushes and swept away critically important surface soil.

Then there's been the price of land. The area between the Gulf of Mexico and the Everglades has become hot property. The congested two-lane highway from the Ft. Myers airport to Immokalee is lined with "For Sale" signs and construction crews

plotting out subdivisions. Soon 20,000 people will move into Ave Maria, an abortion-free development southwest of Immokalee that will encircle the new Catholic university funded by the Dominos pizza fortune.

As a result, Nogaj's blueberry farm is now on top of real estate worth five times its original price. "The farm is no longer saleable as a farm," Nogaj says. "As developable land, its value exceeds the value of farm property." If California's past is Florida's future, Nogaj's blueberry farm may live on only in the name of a future gated community.

In the meantime, though, southwest Florida remains the winter produce capital of the United States, and someone has to pick all those tomatoes and oranges. Dick Nogaj believes that informed consumers will reach out a hand to pull farmworkers out of poverty. Other living-wage efforts focus on the growers or the farmworkers themselves.

Living-wage campaigns have succeeded in putting more money in workers' pockets in 135 cities and counties across America. With rates of unionization stagnant, the federal minimum wage at its [second lowest value since 1955](#), and global competition pressing down salaries, activists have employed creative tactics to end poverty for working people. Bringing a living wage to rural America, however, faces additional obstacles, such as a migrant labor force and legal prohibitions against unionizing on farms.

Unless proposed federal immigration legislation radically restricts the available work force, boosting farmworker wages will fall on the shoulders of a few courageous organizations and individuals who want Americans to radically rethink the food on their plates.

Dirty little secret

Immokalee was the dirty little secret exposed in Edward R. Murrow's famous 1960 "Harvest of Shame" documentary about the conditions for American farmworkers. Mexican, Guatemalan and Haitian workers have largely replaced the African-Americans of Murrow's documentary, but otherwise not a great deal has changed. The two-bedroom trailers that dot the streets on either side of the town's main drag might house as many as a dozen migrants each. In Florida courts over the last seven years, prosecutors have successfully argued [six cases of modern-day slavery](#) affecting over 1,000 farmworkers.

The group responsible for publicizing these slavery cases, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, also made national headlines with its slingshot blow against Taco Bell. This effort required four years of protests, hunger strikes, and boycotts, including a successful "Boot the Bell" campaign that shut down franchises at 22 colleges. In April 2005, Taco Bell signed an agreement with the Coalition that raised by a full penny per pound the price of tomatoes that the restaurant purchases from growers. This difference in price all went into the pockets of farmworkers, nearly doubling some of their wages.

"The workers see it as when man made it to the moon for the first time," says farmworker and Coalition staff member Lucas Benitez. "It's the first time that a workers' organization

has ever been recognized by the world of fast food corporations." As a result of the agreement, farm workers that pick tomatoes bound for Taco Bell receive not only an extra paycheck but also information on why they got the bonus and who to contact if any problems arise on the job.

Since the Taco Bell agreement applies to only about 1,000 tomato pickers, the Coalition has targeted another fast food giant. This March, a busload of 45 Immokalee workers launched the "McDonald's Truth Tour." After touring the Midwest, the farm workers and 350 of their allies marched to the company's flagship restaurant in Chicago with signs proclaiming "McDonald's: I'm Leaving It."

The campaign against McDonald's has picked up some major backers: the AFL-CIO, the Presbyterian Church, former Secretary of Labor Robert Reich. McDonald's funded an "independent" research firm to issue a [report](#) that, not surprisingly, concludes that the fast-food giant is as benevolent toward tomato pickers as its PR department claims. The Coalition responded with a [debunking report](#) from Bruce Nissen of Florida International University.

In the fall, when farm workers return to Immokalee, the Coalition's campaign against McDonald's will likely intensify. The stakes are high. As falls McDonald's, so falls the rest of the fast food industry. "Everyone's waiting to see what McDonald's will do," says Julia Perkins of the Coalition. "We anticipate that once they move, others will move. So that's why we want McDonald's to move in the right direction."

The Coalition's ultimate goal is not just an additional penny per pound but real input into decision making and a living wage. "Farmwork should be paid at the same level as mining," argues Lucas Benitez. "That's also hard, dangerous, and skilled labor. But miners are paid better. Forty thousand dollars a year with benefits -- that's not asking for the stars."

Fair but firm

There are no weekends in Chuck Obern's universe, at least not during growing season. And his growing season is longer than most in Southwest Florida.

"I designed this farm around labor," Obern says. "I have the obligation to keep these people busy every single day."

The first crop of basil on his Clewiston farm is ready in early October, his last eggplants and peppers give out in the middle of June. During those months, his workers are at it seven days a week, 10 hours a day. Highly skilled pickers can take home as much as \$780 a week. Obern provides Spartan but clean accommodations at a clutch of trailers on his land for \$35 a week. He'll shell out for medical needs and even pays a bonus at the end of profitable seasons.

A self-proclaimed redneck with a university background, Obern prides himself on being fair but firm. He is dismissive of unions. He believes that American consumers care only about price, not labels. To ensure quality, he tries to control as much of the chain of production as he can, from planting to trucking. And he prefers a skilled and reliable work force that comes back each season. He'd like to pay more to compete with landscaping and construction, but doesn't think he can without getting higher prices for his produce. "If we have to increase our wages, we'll lose out to Mexico," he says, echoing a common complaint of growers.

Ron Stochlic believes that many farmers would like to do better by their workers but don't realize that improved labor conditions are good for the bottom line. Stochlic's [report](#) for the California Institute for Rural Studies, co-authored with Kari Hamerschlag, identifies best labor practices on 12 California farms, ranging from cost-of-living increases, paid time off, and even retirement plans. Conditions on these 12 organic and sustainable farms are not unique. But, Stochlic says, "when we talked to farmworkers on these farms, the contrast with the other farms they've worked on is striking."

Taking into account that California differs from other agricultural regions -- with its year-round growing season and a regulatory environment that mandates, for instance, overtime pay for farmworkers after 60 hours a week -- Stochlic believes that growers can follow many of the best practices in the report with relatively little investment of money. "Respectful treatment is the number one thing," Stochlic says. Many growers have also shifted from piece rates to hourly rates because "they wanted people to work slower and more carefully to have a good quality product."

"Certainly by creating a campaign that appeals to the better nature of growers, you'll bring in some growers," says Jennifer Gordon, author of "Suburban Sweatshops." "But there's a limit and a pretty tight limit on how many growers will respond to an incentive that doesn't have an economic benefit attached to it."

Stochlic's Institute is looking into various carrots for growers, such as new markets for their fair-labor products. Rather than individual consumers, he's looking at large institutional buyers like Kaiser Permanente, which buys from local organic farms for its hospital cafeterias, and Google, whose cafes provide free organic meals for employees.

Work with dignity

The urban living wage movement has been enormously successful. "All the major cities are done," says Jen Kern of ACORN's Living Wage Resource Center, though she still receives occasional calls from activists in new locations. But these city laws affect only workers whose pay comes from the tax coffers. To reach more workers, activists are now focusing on raising state minimum wages, as voters in Florida did in 2004 by an overwhelming 72 percent. These increases raise farm worker wages as well.

But the minimum wage is not a living wage. Full-time work at Florida's minimum wage, now \$6.40 an hour, translates into \$13,312 a year, below the [poverty line](#) for a family of

three or four. For those who take the lead in pushing up wages in the farm sector above this baseline -- conscious consumers, organized workers, or enlightened growers -- most roads lead to certification. Growers and buyers who want to profit by paying more have to prove it.

Globally, the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements has adopted language on labor standards, but is "very sluggish in implementing it," according to Richard Mandelbaum of El Comité de Apoyo a los Trabajadores Agrícolas (CATA). A farm worker organization centered in New Jersey and Pennsylvania, CATA is emphasizing a "rights-based approach" -- freedom of association, the right to bargain collectively -- to incorporating labor standards in U.S. organic farming. It is currently identifying farms for its pilot program.

The Food Alliance, based in Oregon, has incorporated fair and safe labor standards in its third-party certification program for sustainable agriculture for eight years. To qualify in the labor category, which is just one of four baskets of standards, producers have to score an average of 75 percent across 14 criteria that include grievance procedures, employee benefits, and worker housing. Although the process does not currently mandate that certifiers talk with farm workers, executive director Scott Exo says that "it's something we want to address in the future." The certification agency that Dick Nogaj uses for his blueberries, Fair Food America, also doesn't interview farmworkers, according to the agency's principal, P.J. Maloni.

To increase public support for certification on labor grounds, living wage activists hope to steal a page from the animal rights movement. "It is shameful that organic agriculture includes provisions for the humane treatment of animals whereas conditions for the human beings on the farm is completely absent" from the organic certification process, Richard Mandelbaum says.

The Coalition of Immokalee Workers is also hoping to exploit this irony in its campaign against McDonald's. The fast-food giant gets PR mileage from the happy chickens providing eggs for McBreakfasts and the happy hogs used by its subsidiary Chipotle. "Chipotle's 'manifesto' calls for 'food with integrity,'" says the Coalition's Julia Perkins. "We're saying that 'food with integrity' must include work with dignity."

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