JUST A PENNY MORE (4/07)

Taco Bell did it. McDonald's did it. Now it's time for Burger King and the rest of the country's other fast-food chains to join the drive to guarantee decent pay and working conditions to the tomato pickers whose backbreaking work is essential to their hugely profitable industry.

The pickers work in the Immokalee area of southern Florida where more than half of the country’s tomatoes are grown. Most are undocumented Latinos who've have had little choice but to accept the truly miserable conditions imposed on them.

They work under the blazing sun in open-air sweatshops, usually dawn to dusk, for up to seven days a week, rarely for more than $10,000 a year. They have no paid holidays or vacations, no overtime pay, no health insurance, sick leave, pensions or other benefits, no union rights. Most live in dilapidated trailers or other substandard rental housing.

Some workers are held in virtual slavery by the sometimes physically abusive labor contractors who hire them for the tomato growers. They make deductions from the workers’ wages for transportation, food, housing and other services that can force them to turn over their entire paychecks and continue working against their will until the debts to the contractors are paid off.

Pressures from animal rights activists have led most fast-food chains to insist on humane treatment for the farm animals that provide their main ingredients. But only Taco Bell and McDonald's have acted to ensure that the farm workers employed by their suppliers also are treated humanely.

It took years of hard work by a coalition of workers, student and labor activists, religious leaders and others to get the two chains to act and for tomato pickers to win the significant improvements in pay and working conditions that have been the result.

The first victory came in 2005, after a four-year-long boycott against Taco Bell, one of several outlets owned by Yum Brands. The others include Kentucky Fried Chicken, Pizza Hut, A&W, Long John Silver's and All America Food restaurants.

Yum Brands agreed to increase by a penny what Taco Bell and its other outlets had been paying growers per pound for tomatoes, with the understanding that
the extra penny would go directly to workers. That nearly doubled their pay of just a little over one cent per pound picked, a piece rate that hadn’t been increased since the 1970s. It added as much as $7,000 a year to the average worker’s pay – enough to finally provide a living wage.

What’s more, the coalition won rights unheard of among most farm workers of any kind. It has the right, for instance, to monitor the payment and treatment of the workers, investigate complaints of poor treatment and join with them to confer with growers on improving working conditions. They also have joined to develop a code of conduct for growers and to create a system for resolving disputes.

The agreement warns that Growers who might nevertheless continue to abuse workers risk having the fast-food chains quit buying tomatoes from them.

The coalition reached a similar agreement with McDonald's early in April of this year, just as it was about to launch a threatened nationwide boycott of McDonald's. The chain had been insisting for two years that responsibility for improving the pickers' pay and working conditions rested solely with the tomato growers who employed them.

The growers, however, had adamantly refused – then, as now – to act on their own, in part because McDonald's and other chains have consistently pressured them to keep their prices and labor costs as low as possible.

McDonald's agreement with the workers' coalition seems very likely to lead to agreements with other holdout chains, given McDonald's standing as the largest and most influential entity in the $100-billion-a-year fast-food industry. It has almost 14,000 outlets nationally, using about 15 million tons of tomatoes a year.

The coalition has picked another major chain, Burger King, as the next target. It already has served notice that Burger King must sign an agreement similar to those signed by McDonald's and Yum Brands by the end of the year or face a nationwide boycott. New targets also may include Subway, as well as supermarkets and others outside the fast-food industry that also buy tomatoes from Florida growers.

As before, the coalition is relying heavily on students and other young people, the fast-food chains’ main sales targets, to deliver the message at rallies and demonstrations and on picket lines nationwide with the conspicuous backing of major labor, church and political leaders.
The strong commitment of the young people and their prominent elders, their genuine concern for some of our most vulnerable and mistreated workers and their effective action in the workers' behalf is rare and inspiring.