NEW TARGETS FOR TOMATO PICKERS (6/08)

Taco Bell, McDonald’s, Burger King and some other fast-food restaurants have done it. Now it’s time for other fast-food chains to do it. And for Wal-Mart, Whole Foods and the other large supermarket chains to do it.

It’s time for them to join the drive to guarantee decent pay and decent working conditions to the highly exploited farm workers who pick most of the country’s tomatoes.

The pickers work in the Immokalee area of southern Florida. Most of them are undocumented Latinos who 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 from sunrise to sunset – for up to seven days a week. During a typical day, each of them picks, carries and unloads two tons of tomatoes.

For all that, the pickers rarely get more than $10,000 a year. They have no paid holidays or vacations, no overtime pay, no health insurance, no sick leave, pensions or other benefits. No union rights.

Most of them are forced to live in crowded, dilapidated trailers that rent for as much as $50 per person per week. After paying their rent and other expenses, they may net as little as $20 for a week of very hard labor.

Some of the workers are held in virtual slavery by the labor contractors who hire them for the tomato growers. The contractors 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 their debts to the labor contractors are paid off.

It’s been like that for years. But finally a coalition of workers, student, labor, community and religious activists, lawmakers and others has mounted a nationwide drive aimed at raising the workers’ pay and improving their miserable working and living conditions.

They’ve been holding marches, rallies and other demonstrations, petition drives, and arguing their case before legislative committees. The coalition – the Coalition of Immokalee Workers or CIW – has been scoring some important victories.
The first victory came in 2005 after a four-year-long boycott against Taco Bell, which is owned by a corporation, Yum Brands, that also owns Kentucky Fried Chicken, Pizza Hut, A & W, Long John Silver’s and All America Food Restaurants.

Yum Brands agreed to the CIW’s demand that fast food restaurants increase by a penny what they had been paying growers for a pound of tomatoes and give the extra penny directly to workers. That would nearly double their pay of just a little over one cent per pound picked – a piece rate that had not increased since the 1970s. That would add as much as $7,000 a year to the average picker’s pay – enough to provide a living wage.

The coalition also won the right to monitor the payment and treatment of workers, to investigate complaints about poor treatment, and to confer with growers on improving conditions.

Last year, the CIW won a similar agreement from industry leader McDonald’s, just as it was about to carry out its threat to wage a nationwide boycott of the chain.

Just last month, the world’s second largest fast-food chain, Burger King, came to terms. But reaching that agreement did take another nationwide boycott. Burger King, with annual revenues of well over $2 billion, held out for nearly a year.

Burger King didn’t go down easily. It hired a private security firm that specializes in union busting to secretly obtain information about student and farm labor organizations that helped wage the boycott. The corporation’s vice president actually posted derogatory comments about the coalition on YouTube and other internet outlets under an assumed name. Burger King also tried to pressure McDonald’s and Yum Brands to rescind their agreements with the coalition.

But Burger King is singing a different tune now. The corporation’s CEO, John Chidsey, apologized “for any negative statements about the CIW or its motives previously attributed to Burger King or its employees and now realize that those statements were wrong.”

What’s more, Chidsey pledged that Burger King will now work with the coalition “to further the common goal of improving Florida tomato farm
workers’ wages, working conditions and lives” and to seek “industry-wide, socially responsible change.”

The CIW’s Lucas Benitez also had something important to say. Once, he noted, the tomato pickers were treated as “just another tool and nothing more. But we aren’t alone anymore. There are millions of consumers with us, willing to use their buying power to eliminate the exploitation behind the food they buy.”

That’s very likely to be proved once again at supermarkets and other fast-food outlets that have yet to do what desperately needs to be done.