

FAIR AND NECESSARY

Southwest Florida group builds leadership among farm workers to create change

BY BETH GRIFFIN

Progress in the social justice field is incremental, and time is often measured in decades.

Organizations develop slowly as a group coalesces around a common cause. It can be years before the leadership moves from someone's dining room table to an office with a dedicated phone line. By these standards, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers has flourished like the proverbial mustard seed.

In a scant 15 years, the Coalition has grown from a small group meeting under the auspices of the Southwest Florida Farmworker Project to a large, well-honed organization with national clout and international visibility. The size and scope have multiplied, but the Coalition has kept its unwavering focus on defending the rights of farm workers.

The Coalition has won wage increases for day laborers who harvest tomatoes, citrus, peppers, eggplants, and cucumbers under the hot Florida sun. It has secured better housing for migrant workers and helped to expose and eliminate modern slavery and human trafficking.

Its arsenal of successful techniques includes hunger strikes, boycotts, and a 230-mile march across the state. And its actions have persuaded large corporations such as Taco Bell, McDonald's, and Burger King to consider the pickers when establishing a fair price to pay large produce growers.

The Catholic Campaign for Human Development has supported the Coalition from its start. Bonita Anderson, CCHD grants specialist, describes the Coalition as "empowerment at its best. It is the epitome of a CCHD organization."



Photos courtesy of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW)

SOUTHWEST FLORIDA FARM WORKERS HAND UP THEIR FILLED BUCKETS OF TOMATOES AND CATCH THE EMPTY ONES TO RETURN TO THE FIELDS.

"The Coalition has a strong member base made up of farm workers and other very low-income people," she says. "The membership welcomes newcomers and helps get them involved."

Anderson adds, "It is a multi-issue organization. It's not just about wages, but also about the dignity of the worker, making sure that folks receive decent wages and are treated well in the fields."

Coalition co-founder Lucas Benitez says, "At first, we targeted our struggle to the growers and focused on creating a local base of allies. But through the years, we realized that there are other powers that influence the industry and make decisions. So we shifted our focus to the large corporate buyers who profit from our work. We have also made allies at the national and international level: in every state in this country, and in Mexico and Europe."

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FROM THE DIRECTOR

Dear Friends,

The sweltering heat of the summer drives many of us indoors to homes and offices cooled by refrigerated air. Some choose a dip in the pool. Others trek to beaches, malls, and water parks—all for temporary relief from the elements.



But for many of our brothers and sisters, respite from the heat is not an option, because they work in scorching conditions. Many of the working poor have no opportunity for recreation after working in the fields, on construction sites, or in factories. Rising food and fuel costs continue to shackle many of our country's most vulnerable citizens. Too many are chained to low-wage jobs, substandard housing, and deplorable working conditions.

The Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) has worked to remove the chains of poverty for nearly 40 years. Millions of lives, like those of the Immokalee workers featured here, have been improved and enriched because of the generosity of so many.

While many communities have been helped, the need is ongoing, and the Catholic Church continues to respond in profound ways through the Christ-like compassion and care of so many like you. This November, most parishes across the country will take up the annual Collection to support the anti-poverty work of CCHD. Thank you for your continued generosity in your parish and throughout the year!

Sincerely,



Ralph McCloud
Director, Catholic Campaign for Human Development

HOW YOU CAN HELP

You can donate your time, talent, and treasure to CCHD in many ways. Consider supporting CCHD with a stock donation or a matching gift from your employer, or remember CCHD in your estate planning. For more information about CCHD, or to discuss ways to support our mission, contact Mary Mencarini Campbell at 202-541-3365 or mcampbell@usccb.org. Visit our Web site at www.usccb.org/cchd, or explore the state of U.S. poverty, made up of nearly 37 million Americans, at www.povertyusa.org.

What Is CCHD?

Through the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD), of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), Catholics and friends of CCHD across the country help poor and low-income Americans to help themselves and their communities out of poverty.

Since 1970, the Catholic Campaign has contributed over \$280 million to more than 7,800 low-income-led, community-based projects that strengthen families, create jobs, build affordable housing, fight crime, and improve schools and neighborhoods. CCHD requires that projects develop community leadership and participation so that their solutions to poverty will be long-lasting and effective, and so that CCHD's investment in people will help break the cycle of poverty. CCHD also educates Catholics about the causes of poverty and seeks to build solidarity between impoverished and affluent persons.

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As an example, Benitez says they have heard from representatives of European governments that have investments in some of the companies. “Norway wanted to meet with us to see how they could put pressure on the corporations,” he says.

“We’re open to sharing our experience and helping new groups that want to get started,” says Benitez. “We encourage other groups to participate in our actions and see how we organize.” He describes how a group of hourly-wage stadium cleaners at Camden Yards in Baltimore used some of the Coalition’s techniques to win a contract for wages and benefits.

The Coalition’s relationship with CCHD is both deep and strong, according to Benitez. “The Coalition started in a room in a local Catholic parish. [Former CCHD executive director] Fr. Bob Vitillo had a special interest in our group and was always very supportive. We developed personal relationships and friendships with our partners.”

In recent years, the Coalition has focused on identifying and eliminating slavery. Benitez explains, “Workers are recruited with the promise of good wages and conditions, but some end up in isolated labor camps with armed guards. These are not only immigrant workers, but U.S. citizens, too.”

“We’re working with the authorities to bring cases to justice. Frequently people are afraid to go to the authorities, so they come to us. We check it out and tell them their rights,” he says.

The Coalition’s efforts have helped the federal government win convictions against tyrannical crew bosses, but Benitez hopes that ultimately the “people higher up will be held responsible.”



LUCAS BENITEZ (LEFT) CO-FOUNDED THE COALITION OF IMMOKALEE WORKERS, WHICH HAS GROWN FROM A SMALL GROUP OF CONCERNED FARM WORKERS TO A 2,500-MEMBER ORGANIZATION.

Anderson says, “There is a very challenging road ahead for the Coalition, but they’ve never given up, and they keep forging ahead. They have a very clear strategy to ensure that farm workers have a voice in earning their wages.”

She adds, “They have a lot of credibility. People know who they are. People understand the impact they are having, and the farm workers understand the mission.”

Benitez says that the Coalition has several thousand members who are active primarily during the harvest times, when the community is filled with workers. A core group of 100 to 150 participates in most meetings and events.

“It’s a challenge to create a leadership base in a mobile community,” says Benitez. “We are creating consciousness over and over.” Weekly meetings during the harvest and a low-power FM radio transmission are the tools of education and consciousness-raising, he says.

“We’re making alliances with young people and trying to keep them focused and involved over a long time,” he says.

“We also want to keep our faith allies for the long term,” says Benitez, “but the struggle takes time, and we are not going to make all of the needed changes at one time.”

Benitez says that the Coalition’s work is in sync with Catholic social teaching, which, he says, “incites us to struggle for the dignity of every human being.”

He describes overhearing two growers speaking to one another during a Coalition hunger strike. “They were comparing people to tractors. We’re human beings, not machines!”

“We have to continue to work to change the mentality that sees the growers as masters and the workers as peons,” Benitez says. “But we’ve become a credible organization, because people see our campaigns as fair, necessary, and possible to win. And they see what we have accomplished in such a short time.”

WHERE’S MY MONEY GOING?

All CCHD funds received are used solely for the support of CCHD’s anti-poverty mission. CCHD abides by the charitable standards set by a leading donor advisory service. Our funds are divided as follows: 89% is assigned to CCHD’s core program mission of community empowerment, economic development, education programs, and supporting services; 3% is allocated to coordinate the annual appeal; and 8% is assigned to administrative costs.

We thank you for helping to break the cycle of poverty through your ongoing support for CCHD.

SINGLE PENNY NEARLY DOUBLES WAGE

On May 23, 2008, Burger King Corporation signed an agreement with the Coalition of Immokalee Workers to improve wages and conditions for farm workers who harvest tomatoes used by Burger King restaurants in Florida.

The wage is a net increase of one penny per pound of tomatoes harvested.

So what does a penny a pound mean? It may almost double the daily wage for a picker.


Here's how it works: Workers harvest green tomatoes into brightly colored round plastic buckets that look a lot like patio planters. Each bucket holds about 32 pounds when it is full. The picker carries the laden bucket to the collection truck and hefts it over his or her head to the worker on the truck, who empties it and returns it to the picker.

Until recently, pickers were paid 40 to 45 cents a bucket. The fastest pickers operating under the best conditions can fill 100 buckets in a 10-hour day in the field. That works out to \$40 to \$45 for picking more than one and a half *tons* of tomatoes. And it's a lot less than the Florida minimum wage of \$6.79 per hour.



TOMATO PICKERS LUG HEAVY BUCKETS IN THE HOT FLORIDA SUN. EACH BUCKET WEIGHS ABOUT 32 POUNDS. A FAST PICKER WORKING IN OPTIMAL CONDITIONS CAN PICK ABOUT 100 BUCKETS A DAY.

An increase of one penny a pound gives each picker 32 cents more for each bucket. At 72 to 77 cents a bucket, a worker might make \$72 to \$77 for a 100-bucket day.

It's a huge leap, and one that will help workers feel somewhat less squeezed in these tight times, but it's still not an actual living wage. Hard-working pickers make \$10,000-\$12,000 in a good year—with no benefits. Every penny counts. 

THE POVERTY LINE

Because poverty does not respect boundaries of race, national origin, religion, or geography, CCHD has funded projects in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Over the years, CCHD has provided more than \$280 million in grants, yet there are always more legitimate requests than we can accommodate.

CCHD allocates the majority of the annual Collection to community and economic development projects submitted to the national office for consideration. Individual dioceses retain 25% of the Collection to fund local self-help initiatives. Most dioceses will take up the Collection the weekend of November 22-23 this year.

For more information, visit www.usccb.org/cchd.

