

## Chapter Ten

### CONSCIOUSNESS + COMMITMENT = CHANGE

A Conversation with Lucas Benítez  
of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers

I THINK THAT WE need to create alliances between all the food movements. We all want a healthy food supply and everyone in the chain to be treated with dignity—from the production worker to the consumer. But we are facing a monster: the corporate world. They are only interested in money and profits. We have to be clear, relentless, and determined to do what it takes in our communities to create change where we want it. Eventually these corporations, if we hit them where it hurts—if we go for their profits—will be forced to change the way they do business. Maybe we can't make Walmart disappear, but we can change the way they do business. The power is in our hands. The first thing we must do is develop consciousness and commitment to create change.

We founded the Coalition of Immokalee Workers in 1993 because of the situation that workers in Immokalee were living in, and still live in. In 1995, we went on our first strike. We focused on our bosses, on the contractor, and on our direct superiors because at the time, we felt that they were the problem.

After a closer analysis, we realized that the rancher and the contractor are only a small branch of a much larger tree. We have always said that you can always prune the branches, but the tree will grow back. The coalition continued having marches and strikes, but we saw that we were not going to change things that way. If we don't pull up the tree's roots or water it with different water, we won't get

change. The tree cannot drink polluted water; it needs fresh water if it's going to grow back with good branches and good fruit. We have slowly been creating change. We have switched the water to better water so that it bears better fruit. It's still contaminated, but it is getting better and getting cleaner. For example, there are no more cases of physical abuse; we have reduced the instances of wage theft; and we saw a small increase in salaries. We haven't gotten 100% of what we wanted, but a small change is still a change. We realized that to change the agricultural tree, we had to target the big corporations that have a strong influence in the agricultural industry in this country.

The first year we were able to get over \$100,000 back in withheld wages for our coworkers. This reduced the back wages down to less than 20% each year. It's still a problem, but on a smaller scale. Physical abuse was a frequent problem in the fields and this has decreased. In those days, we had three or four cases of abuse per harvest season. So we marched to our boss's house and picketed in front, like a boycott against him, although at that time we did not see it as a boycott. We just said, "We will no longer work with this contractor because he hit a worker and we will not accept that." Everyone stopped working for him and the rest of the contractors took notice. We have not had any physical abuse reports since 1996. These are big changes, but at same time, these abuses are still happening in other areas. Still, we have set an important precedent.

### **The Agroindustry**

Corporations are changing how business is done, changing our communities. If we want to change that, we have to change them. Many people do not know that in this country family farms no longer produce all of our food. In the past, local family farmers were the main producers; they would sell their goods at the local markets. This is not the case today. Today, corporations have changed both the face of agricultural production and the market. This has happened right here in Florida. A local store here in town that had been selling fresh produce for years was forced to close its doors because Walmart had opened a store nearby.

On a daily basis, farmers' families are being ruined within the greater system. Big corporations put tremendous pressure on small family farms. They don't want to buy from 200 family farmers; they prefer to buy from three industrial farms. They don't care how the product is produced, and they don't care how far they have to go to sell it, whether it's New York or Washington. The small family farm hires many workers. When a small farm gets put out of business, they are also killing off jobs for hundreds of workers that had a relationship with their boss, jobs that were better paid and more humane. That relationship no longer exists. That rancher moved on to become a worker on his own land run by big agroindustry. Food sovereignty cannot be maintained that way.

We must develop consciousness and commitment to create change. That cannot be left in the hands of the government. A clear example was seen in Mexico. During President Vicente Fox's administration he said, "We are going to make it so that the small producer is the exporter of his product. If the world's avocados are produced in Michoacán then we are going to take them away from the bulk buyers." That sounded great. The farmers were happy, the producers of avocados were happy. What happened? Now the ones exporting the avocados are a company owned by Fox's family. They are the ones monopolizing all that small farmers produce. They take advantage of the small farmers and buy their produce for a fraction of the price; then they go out and sell it. In truth, Fox's family is monopolizing and being opportunistic. When he was president, he did everything so that his family could benefit. That is why, when we talk about food sovereignty, it is the community that must be involved, be the monitor, and be the one that is watching and making sure that they abide by the rules. Taking a government to trial in an international court takes a long time. A lot of time goes by before they reach a verdict, and meanwhile the people have to eat junk.

We have to start from the roots, with the community, so that the community knows what we are talking about. We understand our world, but if we don't work from the ground up we won't advance.

It's like talking about a penny raise only amongst the Coalition. We understand, but if we don't get the community involved, they won't understand. They are the ones that will get the penny raise

### **The NAFTA Flu**

**By David Bacon**

Bacon's analysis of the intersection of immigration and labor in the food system draws on the example of Mexican migrants working for Smithfield Food's hog-raising and slaughtering facilities. While outlining the injustices of working for Smithfield (no worker protection; environmental damage; severe health repercussions), he connects food injustice and insecurity as manifestations of the lack of labor rights.

*We can't have food sovereignty that looks at the food needs of people as migrants that doesn't also see that the reason why people [experience] food insecurity is because they don't have legal status or people are being treated as . . . a very exploitable labor force . . . where the main objective of the system is to ensure that people work for the lowest wages as possible meaning that people's income is so low that people can't even guarantee themselves the food that they need to eat much less send money home to their home communities where people now depend on those remittances in order to be able to feed themselves.*

Bacon discusses the importance of political reform as a means to address injustices within the immigration system, and food insecurity for migrant populations and their families.

*An immigration reform that included a jobs program for communities with high unemployment would put a floor under the income of working families, while removing the fear of job competition. We need a system that produces security, not insecurity. Major changes in immigration policy are not possible without fighting at the same time for these basic needs. But these are needs that working people have in common, not just immigrants. By fighting together, people can create a more just society for everyone, immigrant and nonimmigrant alike.*

Full Article at: <http://www.foodmovementsunite.com/addenda/d-bacon>

and they will see that as a gain. If it is later taken away, they will feel as though that benefit was taken back. They are not aware. The same goes for the government; they give you something for a while then they take it. And people say, “We ate well for a while and then it was over.” If we educate our communities, then things will be different. Our mathematic equation is  $C + C = C$ . That means: Consciousness (awareness) plus Commitment equals Change. That is what we do. If we don’t have those variables, we can’t create change.

It is very important that young people become involved in this movement, because they have to make the change from compulsive buying to responsible buying. This is the first thing that must be done. I think young people are doing this more and more, especially those that are focused on eating well—vegans, vegetarians, and others. What happens is that sometimes they don’t look to see what is behind the production of their food. They pay more for good food, but this is not passed on to the workers. They need to get out of that box where they have the luxury to be studying, the luxury of having a job without having to think about where their food came from. Young people in universities have power. We have to start there. They live there, they eat there, and that administration feeds them. The students pay for that food. Because they are the university’s clients, they can change the way the university does business. Many universities offer fair trade coffee because students asked for it. The students made that change. The university changed because their clients asked them to. Starting with their own universities, young students can have a big impact.

Most important is mutual respect for each other’s struggle. Many times, there are academics, people that believe they are industry experts in a certain area, but they don’t have experience working on the ground. These people have conducted studies, and they have spoken to workers, but they have not worked in the fields. It’s nice that they write it up and that their voice is heard, but just the same, they have to recognize that the ones *working* are the experts, and they must give them recognition for that. A mutual respect amongst everyone is what can lead us to a world with sustainable food.

Poor people are the most marginalized, and we consume the worst food in the food chain. What we get here is what they don't want at the nicer stores where they pay more. We have the experience of knowing how to work the land; we can share our experiences in cooperatives. The world of co-ops is growing more; people are creating their own community gardens. This is important knowledge because there are people that have grown up in places like New York City that have no idea where the tomato in their salad came from. This is a true story: I have a friend from New York City that asked me how it was possible for cucumbers to grow in vinegar. She had no clue! There are many young people out there like that; it is their reality. We have to connect the urban world, the city, with us farmers; not only is this interesting, but also necessary.

We realize that it is a long road and that we have just begun. Other movements like the animal rights movement and the movements to save the environment have been on this road much longer than us; workers' rights have never been addressed like this. I think we play an important role as a coalition in the new socially responsible world. The consumers are also beginning to become involved. Consumers pay more for organic produce and for free-range animal products.

### **Raising Consciousness**

Corporations know that they have to change to become socially responsible. The words "*socially responsible*" were not part of the vocabulary in the corporate world two decades ago. The words have become a fad, and corporations use them as makeup so that they look good in the media, while in reality, they continue having an ugly face. We want that pretty face to be pretty without makeup, we want surgery that truly changes it and leaves the face like new. We want them to actually be completely socially responsible. At the coalition we said to ourselves, 'if we are talking about social responsibility, we are the ones missing in this picture.' Before, they never spoke about the workers. With the Fair Food campaign, we have started to enter the picture where the worker traditionally

did not have a place—at the Kellogg, Slow Food, and Bioneers conferences that we have been invited to people say, ‘We are seeing things that we had not thought of before.’ What good is it to be vegan and eat a plate of organic mushrooms, if the salaries paid to the workers are lousy, and they have no medical benefits and no overtime pay? This means that nothing changes, and they are just paying more for organic mushrooms. That is how we come into play with the existing food movements, and how we make them stronger.

We are all connected; we are all in the same basket—from the office worker to the farmworker. We are connected because if I don’t harvest the vegetables, you don’t eat. If the butcher does not do a good job, you don’t get a good steak. It is all a chain. Some produce, others consume; at the end of the day it all ends up on a table. Generally, we don’t consider how the food got to our table. It is important to take a moment to reflect: ‘Is what I am doing right? Can I do more?’

Pay attention, and respect the people in the food chain, because a New York waiter could be exploited, and you indifferently eat at the restaurant. One must open one’s eyes, one’s mind, and one’s heart to make the food system change, to make it healthy. Your plate of food may look pretty, but it is filled with the tears and sweat of exploitation. The tomato that makes it to Whole Foods will never make it to the Winn-Dixie here in Immokalee; it’s not the same quality tomato. Here we only get the cheapest tomato, and that is what happens in the poor neighborhoods.

Even though there have been some changes, the majority of the worst abuses are still happening. We have to develop different strategies. You have to set a precedent like the one we set with McDonald’s to create change in other corporations. We have been able to get corporations to accept responsibility for farmworkers who make up the bottom of the production chain. If we were able to get them to accept responsibility for us, other people in other industries in other communities can demand the same from

corporations. The precedent we set gives them a solid platform to make their demands to the corporations. We are not going to tell people what to do in their communities, but we have created a platform so that other communities can do something.

Our current strategy is to change people's attitudes and the way business is done. We are not saying we are going to boycott tomatoes in Florida. We don't believe that is a good strategy because we need to work, our families need to eat, and American families need tomatoes in their kitchens. That is why we do it corporation by corporation. Tomatoes are not like apples, peaches, or grapes—products that you can choose to eat or not to eat. No, tomatoes are an important ingredient in lots of foods. That's why we're doing it corporation by corporation. We attacked Taco Bell, but people had options to go to other fast-food restaurants. Once we got Taco Bell to the negotiation table, it was no longer necessary to boycott McDonald's or any of the other seven corporations. If we had to boycott them, we would have been closing one door and opening another, but it wasn't necessary. One by one, little by little, we are changing them.

### **Alliances**

There are two important branches in this movement: the student branch and the religious branch. The young people played an important role in the civil rights movement—blacks, whites, Latinos, everybody; they wanted to change the situation. After the civil rights movement, the student movement fell apart. The students focused on their studies and they graduated. Today, we have big professionals and big brands without a mentality of change, without a social vision.

Students Forever was born out of the fair food movement and has gained force in the last few years; it is an alliance between farmworkers and students. Currently, there are student groups involved in the project throughout the country. This project is a wake-up call for them, not only to help us with the coalition and the

tomato campaign in Immokalee, but also to create change in their own communities.

It is the same thing with the religious branch. For a while they were becoming more and more conservative: “We have to go pray and have God fix everything.” Now, many religious leaders have told us that the fair food campaign “gives us the ability to practice the word of God, in our lives today; to change the situation for thousands of people.” We have created alliances with Presbyterian, Unitarian, Catholic, and Evangelical churches. In our rallies, you can see Jews, Catholics, and Muslims coming together for a greater cause. An example is the archbishop of the dioceses in Orlando, Florida, speaking with pastors from other churches about how they can advance the campaign against Publix; how they can work together with their congregations to exercise some power and change the executives’ minds at Publix.

We have worked very closely with other workers in the fast-food industry, supermarkets, meat processing, and with other workers in similar situations. We shared experiences with the leaders of the Smithfield campaign. Many of the Immokalee workers work in those packing plants. Contractors come here and take workers to work in the chicken industry in Iowa and other places. Many times, our members working in other places call us and ask us how to act when they have a problem. We instruct them to do the same thing we do here: they have to form a committee and speak with the supervisor to try and change the situation on the inside. Some of our members have participated in starting unions or in the collection of signatures to form unions in the packing companies.

We were able to establish a zero-tolerance policy for slavery, and we gained a penny in pay for the workers’ wages; not only that, but workers are guaranteed to play an integral part in the monitoring and design of the conduct code. These are big changes, but at the same time, they are small because it is only true for the Immokalee community. We have not yet played a significant role in the food sovereignty movement, but I don’t see any obstacles. We can be part

of the movement if each sector is respected and self-coordinated. People played an important role in the civil rights movement—blacks, whites, Latinos, everybody. People like writers and industry experts that fight for fairness in the agricultural industry can help the cause tremendously by helping our voices, the voices that represent food sovereignty and fair food, be heard in the higher-up places. United, with each different experience, we are stronger.