

# American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations



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August 21, 2006

Mr. James A. Skinner  
Chief Executive Officer  
McDonald's Corporation  
One McDonald's Plaza  
2915 Jorie Boulevard  
Oak Brook, Illinois 60523

Dear Mr. Skinner:

I am writing to urge McDonald's to improve its standards for growers that supply produce and other farm products to your company. Shamefully, many farm workers in the United States work under deplorable conditions that have long been eradicated in other developed countries and are prohibited by International Labor Organization Conventions and other human rights standards. I urge you to protect McDonald's brand name by improving the wages and working conditions of farm workers who supply produce for McDonald's sandwiches and salads.

In recent years, many of the most egregious labor rights violations in the United States have occurred in the Florida produce industry. Since 1997 the U.S. Department of Justice has successfully prosecuted five agricultural operations for modern-day workplace slavery, resulting in the conviction and imprisonment of seven agricultural employers. In these cases, farm workers have been forced to work against their will, held captive, and coerced through violence or the threat of violence. Clearly, these labor practices are incompatible with McDonald's reputation as a responsible company.

I myself have seen the deplorable working and living conditions that Florida farm workers face. This April I traveled to Immokalee, Florida, with Mrs. Robert F. Kennedy to meet and talk with farm workers from the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) and mark the 40-year anniversary of Kennedy-AFL-CIO support for César Chávez. What I saw in Immokalee appalled me. I am upset, if not surprised, to see conditions like that in Central America or China, but it is shocking and shameful for such low wages and atrocious working conditions to exist in the United States.

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I, personally, and the AFL-CIO, institutionally, are committed to robustly supporting the CIW and the Campaign for Fair Food. We are proud members of the Alliance for Fair Food, a network that includes scores of human rights, faith, student, and community leaders and institutions nationwide. And already to date, the AFL-CIO has supported over 200,000 labor activists sending letters to McDonald's and Chipotle calling for fair wages and working conditions in the companies' supply chains.

American consumers will not patronize a company that is perceived to profit from the exploitation of farm workers. Any association with human rights abuses will damage the McDonald's brand name, your company's most valuable asset. McDonald's own code of conduct explicitly recognizes this risk, stating that "actions by those with whom McDonald's does business are sometimes attributed to McDonald's itself, affecting its reputation and the goodwill it has with its customers and others."

For these reasons, McDonald's must act to ensure that human rights violations do not occur in its produce supply chain. As one of the nation's leading consumers of fruits and vegetables, McDonald's wields tremendous buying power in the produce market in Florida and nationally. As a result of this economic clout, McDonald's has the ability and opportunity to dramatically improve the wages and working conditions of the farm workers who supply produce for McDonald's sandwiches and salads.

McDonald's past efforts to address farm worker abuses appear to have been more focused on managing public relations than effecting genuine change in the produce industry. Employer-dominated initiatives such as the Socially Accountable Farm Employers ("SAFE") do not reduce the responsibility of McDonald's to prevent human rights abuses in its supply chain. SAFE is represented by CBR Public Relations, a McDonald's public relations firm that specializes in "activist response management."

There are several steps McDonald's should take to mitigate the risk of human rights violations by its produce suppliers.

I encourage McDonald's to partner with the CIW to develop an enforceable grower code of conduct that reflects the needs and priorities of those who work to harvest produce for McDonald's. This code should ensure that farm workers receive a living wage and adequate benefits. Specifically, McDonald's should immediately agree to pay a fairer price of at least one more penny per pound for the tomatoes it purchases with that increase passed on to farm workers. Particularly given the decades of stagnant farm worker wages, documented by the U.S. Department of Labor, immediate economic relief is imperative.

The grower code of conduct should also guarantee basic worker rights, including the right to organize and collectively bargain. Farm workers are excluded from key federal laws,

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including the National Labor Relations Act, that protect the rights of workers in other industries. Unfortunately, McDonald's current supplier standards exploit these legal deficiencies.


Crucially, only a code that is based upon universally accepted standards that are developed, monitored, and enforced with full worker participation will effectively address the risk of human rights violations. Similarly, only if McDonald's commits to transparency in its tomato supply chain can any code of conduct be meaningfully enforced.

Farm worker participation in each of these steps is indispensable if your company hopes to develop a truly effective response to the current human rights crisis in Florida agriculture, and any effort to control or limit that participation will inevitably diminish the credibility of McDonald's response. For worker participation to be meaningful, it *must* come from a position of full independence from employers, by informed workers experienced in the area of labor rights. The CIW—a widely respected human rights organization, a recognized leader in the fight against modern-day slavery, and the organization that brought these issues to McDonald's through their campaign—is the only appropriate worker organization to play that role in this process.

The crisis in Florida's fields presents McDonald's with the opportunity to break important new ground in corporate responsibility by leading the way toward humane labor standards for U.S. farm work after decades of abuse. McDonald's leadership in this arena is crucial. Labor exploitation is so severe and deeply-rooted in Florida agriculture that it is unconscionable to leave the solution to the very employers who have been responsible for those abuses. Your company must not let its vision—and its reputation—be defined by agricultural employers who do not share McDonald's commitment to principles of social responsibility.

I commend McDonald's strong commitment to corporate responsibility, and I am confident that you will take the necessary steps to prevent human rights abuses in the produce industry in the United States. As a first step, I encourage you to work with the Coalition of Immokalee Workers to improve the lives of farm workers. I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

  
John J. Sweeney  
President, AFL-CIO

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