# Help Stop Sweatshops in the Fields: Boycott Taco Bell!

In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus teaches that the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who hired more day laborers than he needed but paid them all a full day's wage even if they only worked part of a day (Mt. 20:1-16). When some who had worked all day grumbled that this was not fair, the landowner explains that he has paid them the wage upon which they had agreed. Could it be that the landowner in the kingdom of heaven knows that all workers need a wage on which they can live? The kingdom's landowner established a floor below which no laborer can fall.

Day labor continues in the farming industry today. At 4:30 each morning Latino, Haitian and Mayan Indian immigrants gather in a parking lot in Immokalee, Florida, awaiting the arrival of buses that will take them to the fields to pick tomatoes. Though many come, not all are chosen. Those workers who are left behind return home to their trailer without any wages for the day. Those who are chosen to work will be delivered to the fields where they may spend additional hours waiting to begin harvesting and waiting whenever rain makes it impossible to work. The workers are paid only for what they pick. If they do not pick many buckets of tomatoes, they earn next to nothing.

In Immokalee, Florida, pickers who work in the fields harvesting tomatoes are paid as little 40 cents for each 32 pound bucket they pick and haul. This is the average wage that workers received in 20 years ago! At this rate, workers must pick and haul two tons of tomatoes to earn $50. According to the Department of Labor, farm workers earn about $7,500 per year on average. Further, in the past five years workers along with the Department of Justice have investigated, exposed, and prosecuted five cases of debt-bondage slavery involving more than 1,000 workers.

In 1996 workers formed the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, a community-based workers organization. The CIW is composed of workers and led by workers. Their motto is "from the people; for the people" and they have been successful in resisting wage reductions, decreasing the incidences of violence in the field, and drawing attention to the exploitative conditions under which workers labor. They are working to increase wages and improve working conditions. Because agricultural laborers are not covered by the National Labor Relations Act, growers are under no obligation to dialogue with worker representatives.

So the workers asked, who buys the tomatoes we pick? They discovered that Taco Bell, the largest fast-food Mexican-style restaurant in the world, is an important client of Florida tomato growers and uses fresh picked tomatoes for its tacos, burritos and other food products. The workers implored Taco Bell to use its power ensure growers in its supply chain paid workers fairly and respected their rights. But Taco Bell said that the harvesting conditions of the tomatoes they buy are not their concern. They do not intervene in their suppliers' labor disputes. So the CIW called for a nationwide consumer boycott of Taco Bell in 2001.

The boycott has been endorsed by the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., United Methodist Church, United Church of Christ, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), and the American Friends Service Committee and other regional and local religious bodies.

The CIW and those who support the boycott are calling for three-way talks between the Taco Bell (and its parent company Yum Brands), the growers who supply tomatoes to the company, and workers; for the company and the growers to work with the CIW to establish an enforceable code of conduct that ensures labor rights for the workers; and for an immediate increase in workers' wages. One way of raising wages *now* would be for Taco Bell/Yum to increase the per pound rate that it pays for tomatoes and ensure that increase was passed along to the workers. For example each if Taco Bell were to voluntarily pay just 1 cent more per pound, and require its suppliers to pass that penny along to the pickers, that one penny could almost double the picking piece rate. If Taco Bell passed this cost on to its customers, this would translate into a price increase of about one-quarter of a cent per Chalupa. It is indeed a small price to pay for the well-being of so many hard working and impoverished pickers. Please boycott Taco Bell and to let the company know of your decision. Let them know that the quality of their food is linked to the dignity with which it is produced. Fast food must be fair food. Encourage them to use their power to help stop "sweatshops in the fields".

**Ways you can help!**
**(Go to www.pcusa.org/boycott for complete information and resources)**
- Pray for the workers, growers, and Taco Bell.
- Pledge to boycott Taco Bell and write the company. Mr. Emil Brolick, President, Taco Bell Corp., 17901 Von Karman, Irvine, CA 92614. Please *also* write to the Board of Directors of Taco Bell's parent company, Yum! Brands Inc. at 1441 Gardiner Lane, Louisville, KY 40213.
- Please *also* write to the Board of Directors of Taco Bell's parent company, Yum! Brands Inc. at 1441 Gardiner Lane, Louisville, KY 40213 and ask them to ensure workers' welfare just as they ensure the welfare of animals throughout their supply chain.
- Leaflet at a Taco Bell restaurant and tell others about the boycott.
- Let worker justice be a criterion for whether your school allows franchises such as Taco Bell to operate on your campus.
- Does your youth group order Taco Bell for meals? Make your own tacos and invite the group to letter-write!

**A Prayer for Good Work and Human Dignity**
God who labors and rests, you who intend good for all your children, we seek your wisdom and courage as we work to change the harsh conditions under which so many labor. We remember the farm-workers, the growers, Taco Bell and Yum Brands. We ask that we might be your witnesses for good work, fair pay, and human dignity. Help us to create the kind of vineyards that are a part of Jesus' heavenly kingdom. In his name we pray. Amen.