
AT WHAT COST

HUMAN TRAFFICKING |

| FORCED LABOR |

| CHILD LABOR

AT WHAT COST:

Tomatoes

The market for winter tomatoes in the United States exhibits what is now a familiar trend in agriculture: business consolidation and falling prices. Since Mexico's entry into NAFTA in the 1990s, growers in Florida have faced stiff competition from imported tomatoes. In turn, large fast-food companies—such as McDonald's and Taco Bell's parent company, Yum! Brands—and grocery chains—including Wal-Mart—now make up the bulk of the market. These factors have combined to put downward pressure on the prices growers can pay for tomatoes—prices have dropped more than 20 percent over the past two decades. Smaller growers have simply been priced out of existence. Those who remain feel intense pressure to meet buyers' price demands.

In the Immokalee region of South Florida, these price demands have been pushed down the chain to a large pool of vulnerable workers. The vast majority of tomato pickers are seasonal migrants, who have little choice but to accept whatever conditions employers put on their jobs. The labor itself is intensely physically demanding. To make a decent wage—\$50—tomato pickers must gather as much as two tons of tomatoes per day, by hand. Moreover, these workers are often dependent on their employers for transportation and housing. This toxic mixture of intense pressure for cost cutting and workers who utterly lack bargaining power produces labor conditions that have risen to the level of slavery in several cases.

Federal prosecutors have obtained several slavery convictions in the past 15 years. Tomato pickers have been forced into debt bondage by coyotes and by contractors who rent shoddy trailers near work-sites at Manhattan prices. Without transportation of their own, workers must take what they can get. Some report being assaulted if they attempt to leave work sites. All are paid meager wages for strenuous labor, and are required to be on site at all times, even if there is no work at the moment. As people migrate to Florida and other southern states where work is available, forced labor in the sex, restaurant, and domestic industries comes along with them.

Tomato-picker activists have waged a pro-labor campaign that has recently won major victories. McDonald's, Yum, Burger King, Whole Foods, and a number of other tomato buyers committed to paying an additional penny for each pound of tomatoes picked, and to cut ties with growers implicated in slavery. After years of campaigning, growing companies have finally agreed to pass these wage increases on to tomato pickers. The result is the first increase for wages for pickers in 30 years.

These changes represent significant gains for hard-pressed workers, but they are not a panacea. They are not universal, and growers are not independently monitored. Moreover, as voluntary agreements to pay above-market rates, they rest on shaky ground. Ultimately, the conditions that led to the miserable circumstances for tomato pickers are still in place. Buyers are still dominated by corporations that face shareholder pressure to cut costs and raise profits by any means necessary. Growers still face fierce competition from overseas exports, operate on slim margins, and are subject to the vicis-