Farmworkers Fight for Justice
“We won’t stop until we are treated like human beings.”

An Interview with Farmworker Lupe Gonzalo

Lupe Gonzalo (left) is a Florida farmworker and an organizer with the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW). She is from Guatemala. She came to the U.S. looking for work so she could take care of her family. She worked in the fields for 12 years. For the last three seasons, she has worked full-time with the CIW.

Tell me more about being a farmworker. What are the hours? What is the work like?

Before the Fair Food Program (FFP) [see box explaining FFP on next page], we worked 12 or 13 hours in the fields. We could never be sure how much time we would work because nothing was ever guaranteed. We’d get up at 3:30 or 4 in the morning to go to the parking lot to look for work. We waited there, and we hoped they’d choose us to work. If they chose us for work, we might get to the fields at 6 or 7AM. However, often, we couldn’t start picking until 10 AM since we had to wait until the tomatoes were completely dry before picking. The whole time we waited was unpaid since we got paid by the piece-rate.

When we finally started to work, we experienced many abuses. We endured extreme heat and pesticide exposure, as well as physical and verbal abuse. One time a crew leader beat a young worker for taking a drink of water. Abuse like this was the norm back then. He came to the CIW office with a bloodied shirt. We took the shirt as a sort of flag and marched to the crew leader’s house. We declared, “A hit to one of us, is a hit to all of us.”

For us women, sexual harassment was our daily bread. The crew bosses used to hold a lot of power, and they abused their power. They knew the mothers needed to work everyday to provide for their families, and they took advantage of that. We couldn’t do anything about it. We knew if we spoke up, we would lose our jobs, and if we lost our jobs we wouldn’t be able to provide for our children. So our only choice was to continue working without saying anything.
What is the Fair Food Program?

1. Participating buyers (such as Taco Bell and Whole Foods) pay an additional penny per pound for tomatoes.
2. Participating buyers must agree to zero tolerance for forced labor and sexual assault.
3. Farmworkers can carry out education sessions on the farms and on company time to insure workers understand their new rights and responsibilities.
4. Workers can register their complaints (including a 24-hour hotline) leading to investigation, corrective action, and, if necessary, suspension of a farm’s Participating Grower status, and thereby limiting its ability to sell to Participating Buyers.
5. There are Health and safety committees on every farm to give workers a voice about their work environment.
6. Ongoing auditing of the farms ensures compliance with each element of the FFP.

How did you decide to become an organizer for the CIW?

I spent 12 years working in the fields. I saw first-hand how the CIW was helping to change the conditions for tomato pickers as well as organizing farmworkers in the community. And I wanted to be part of it. If we want to transform an industry, we have to fight for it. We have to fight for our dignity and respect.

Tell me about one of CIW’s victories.

Our Campaign for Fair Food started in 2001, focusing on Taco Bell. After winning the first corporate agreement in 2005, we now have agreements with 12 major retailers. In 2010, we reached an agreement with the Florida Tomato Growers Exchange, which represents 90% of the Florida tomato industry. The new partnership between corporations, the tomato industry, and farmworkers meant that we could raise standards and protect workers’ rights in the fields.

Can you say more about how this victory changed farmworkers’ lives?

For decades, farmworkers in Florida were ignored. But now, for the first time, we are able to educate other tomato pickers about their rights and responsibilities under the Fair Food Program (FFP).

One of the rights we now have, thanks to the FFP, is getting paid at least minimum wage. Under the FFP, companies have to install time clocks. For the first time, our hours are being counted! Consequently, they don’t pick us up so early for work. They come when the field is ready to be picked. This has made a huge difference in the lives of families. For example, a father told us he is now able to make breakfast for his child, walk him to school, and still get to work on time. At night, when we come home from the fields, we no longer feel the weight of all the abuses. So we are more available to our families.

We are on a path of transformation—one that is full of dignity. Our lives are improving in the fields and also at home.

What else has changed?

We used to earn piece-rate, which means we got paid for every bucket we filled. This meant that even if you spent many hours in the fields, your wage at the end of the day could still be very low. Now, we are not only guaranteed a minimum wage, we also receive bonuses in our pay checks. There are 12 participating corporations that have committed to working with us to change conditions in their supply chain. They are paying one penny more per pound to buy tomatoes. It might
not sound like a lot but it’s a significant increase for workers. Between January 2011 and May 2014, workers received more than $14 million in bonuses due to the extra penny per pound.

**How did you get these 12 corporations to sign on to the FFP?**

These corporations didn’t just sign on because they woke up one day and decided it would be a good thing. They signed on because we pressured them to sign. We said, “Enough with those abuses.” We formed alliances with consumers throughout the country. Students have played a crucial part in the Campaign for Fair Foods. For example, they told Taco Bell they were going to kick them out of their colleges unless Taco Bell agreed to sign on to the FFP. Our strategy has worked. It’s been hard, but we’re seeing the changes. Walmart—the biggest retailer in the world—joined the FFP last January, before we even mounted a campaign against them. Walmart realized that this is the future, so they stepped up and did the right thing.

**What are some challenges that the Fair Food Program faces?**

One challenge is getting other major buyers to commit to the FFP. For example, Wendy’s and Publix refuse to negotiate with us. So we have campaigns focused on pressuring them to come to the table. Until we are treated like human beings, and that is the norm throughout the whole industry, we won’t stop fighting.

We want Wendy’s and Publix to take off their blindfolds and see that they have a responsibility to the workers who pick their tomatoes. Consumers must also take responsibility to know under what conditions their tomatoes were harvested.

Another challenge is expanding the program outside Florida. But we want to ensure the FFP will be strong in the tomato industry before moving into other crops and other states in the future.

**Is there anything else you want to add?**

Thank you for giving me this chance to spread our message. We know that when people are committed to justice, change will come. When we struggle together, we achieve so much. When we work shoulder to shoulder, we have so much force.

Lupe Gonzalo is a mother, a farmworker, and an organizer with the CIW. She was interviewed by Cynthia Peters, the editor of The Change Agent. Claudia Saenz, from the Student/Farmworker Alliance interpreted for Lupe and Cynthia during the interview.

---

**Videos Featuring Lupe Gonzalo**

1. International Women’s Day – <ciw-online.org/blog/2013/05/lupe-honored>
2. The Perennial Plate – <http://vimeo.com/39128568>

---

**What Can You Do?**

1. Get involved in the Wendy’s campaign. Visit <ciw-online.org/wendys> and find out how you can call or write to Wendy’s, or educate others about the campaign.
2. Find out how you can help hold large supermarkets (like Publix, Stop & Shop, Giant, and Kroger) accountable. <ciw-online.org/supermarkets>.
3. Keep learning more about the issue. Visit <ciw-online.org/resources> and find articles, fact sheets, and short videos.