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Florida farmworker coalition hails new agreement with tomato growers

by Laura Dodson by Catholic News Service

IMMOKALEE, Fla. -- Silvia Perez, who has survived the worst during her 17 years of working in the tomato fields, said she was overjoyed with recent landmark events aimed at increasing wages and improving working conditions.

"It is the message of my church (Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish) and my faith that has kept me going," she said. "My belief is that if I worked hard for change -- things would change and these images of hope would become reality."

On Oct. 12, Pacific Tomato Growers, one of the country's oldest and largest tomato growers, signed an agreement with the Coalition of Immokalee Workers joining its Campaign for Fair Food. On Oct 21, Six L's Packing Co., Florida's largest tomato grower, followed its lead. Perez has worked for both.

"Underneath the agreements, there are assurances that the workers will be able to speak up regarding both abuses and the conditions," she said. "For example, if there's physical abuse, like the teenage boy who was beaten bloody because he was thirsty and went for a drink of water, or the lack of facilities to use.

"If there's a particular labor contractor who is being over-demanding in how they treat workers, the workers will be able to speak up against this abuse," Perez said in an interview.

The signed agreements set new standards for social responsibility, incorporating a code of conduct that includes complaint resolution, a health and safety program, and education for farmworkers that encourages them to become active participants in the industry they serve. There also will now be external auditing to ensure payment of a penny-per-pound increase that raises farmworker wages.

"The transgressions that take place (against workers) are totally unacceptable in today's world," stated Jon Esformes, operating partner of Pacific Tomato Growers during a press conference during which the agreement with his company was signed. "They were unacceptable in yesterday's world, but today we are standing here to speak out as a company and a force in the agricultural industry for what is right."

"The recent announcements of the agreements which benefit the farmworkers bring great joy," said Bishop Frank J. Dewane of Venice. "These announcements are just the latest step for bringing fair wages and working conditions for the workers."

"While there is a time for joy, the struggle to help recognize and preserve human dignity -- particularly the dignity of the workers -- continues with everyone working together to seek justice in this matter," he said.

The Coalition of Immokalee Workers is a community-based farmworker organization, based in Immokalee, that seeks modern working conditions, fair treatment in accordance with human rights standards and a living wage for farmworkers, most of whom are Mexican or Central American migrants.

According to a recent story in The Wall Street Journal, the U.S. Justice Department has prosecuted seven operations in the past 20-plus years for allegedly abusing hundreds of farmerworkers, including in Florida. Some working conditions have been described by federal investigators as being like modern-day slavery.

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The coalition's efforts have included letter-writing campaigns, boycotts and marches that have resulted in agreements with major fast-food corporations such as Yum Brands, which includes Taco Bell, as well as McDonald's and Burger King.

Whole Foods Market, the nation's leading organic food retailer, joined in 2008 bringing along Florida's two largest organic growers and in 2009, Compass Group, a major food service provider was followed by East Coast Growers and Packers. Aramark and Sodexo, also food service giants have aligned.

"Most agricultural employers are people of good will," said Miami Archbishop Thomas G. Wenski, in a statement regarding the agreement between the coalition and Pacific Tomato Growers. "But what is significant here is that we have leaders in the industry agreeing to set high standards for protection of workers."

The archbishop is president of the board of the Florida Catholic Conference, the public policy arm of the state's bishops.

"We hope and really feel that this is the beginning of a new era -- one in which the agricultural industry engages in real responsibility that benefits both the industry itself and us the workers -- and one in which we see each other as the human beings we are," said Lucas Benitez, co-founder of the Immokalee coalition.

"And so it's now the time for all consumers of tomatoes -- specifically the supermarket industry where our campaign is focused right now -- local as well as national -- chains such as Walmart, Publix, Ahold, Kroger and others to come to the table and support this new era of social responsibility," he said. "We're grateful to be here and look forward to the future."

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