

## After McDonald's Victory, Labor Activists Target Burger King <sup>13</sup>

by Kari Lydersen at [newstandardnews.net](http://newstandardnews.net)

Apr. 19 – It took four years for Taco Bell's parent company to agree to demands that the restaurant take responsibility for the wages and working conditions of migrant laborers who pick its tomatoes. It took another two years for McDonald's to accept a similar deal.

Last week, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW), a Florida farmworker-run group, claimed victory in its long-fought campaign to force McDonald's to pay just one cent more per pound of tomatoes, a raise that will be passed directly on to pickers. The restaurant giant negotiated a contract with the CIW just days before the coalition planned to announce a boycott during actions at the fast-food giant's Oak Brook, Illinois headquarters last weekend.

Now, the coalition says Burger King must come to the negotiating table before the end of the year or face a boycott. Once McDonald's conceded, the Immokalee workers and their supporters didn't waste any time jump starting the Burger King campaign, switching the focus of a rally and carnival in Chicago on April 14 from "Ronaldo" McDonald to "El Rey" – "The King."

At a welcome dinner held the group's first night in Chicago, featuring a pre-ordered cake decorated with stumbling plastic clowns, Coalition supporters couldn't help breaking out with the chant "Ronaldo se cayó" – "Ronald has fallen." As reported by The NewStandard in 2005, McDonald's had previously infuriated the Coalition by signing onto an industry-originated voluntary certification program called Socially Accountable Farm Employer (SAFE), considered toothless by workers' advocates.

During performances by local and national musicians at the Immokalee carnival April 14, attendees waved a paper-maché crown and taunted Burger King.

Company representatives have so far refused to pay the one cent raise for tomato-pickers. Burger King spokesperson Keva Silversmith told TNS the company has no control over tomato pickers' wages and working conditions, since it does not employ them directly, but buys tomatoes from suppliers. "We have no channel where we can directly influence the workers' wages," Silversmith said

That argument rings hollow, however, since Taco Bell's parent company Yum Brands, which signed an agreement with the CIW in March 2005, and McDonald's also buy their tomatoes through third parties. As part of their agreements, the companies are developing independent monitoring programs to make sure the raise is enforced and that a workers' rights code of conduct is followed.

Burger King has offered to stop buying from suppliers if the CIW proves they are violating federal labor law. US laws, however, offer few protections for farmworkers. Unlike workers in most other industries, farmworkers are not guaranteed the legal right to overtime pay or collective bargaining.

Silversmith said Burger King had also offered to train the immigrants for jobs in its restaurants. "We've definitely been open to recruiting Immokalee workers into the Burger King system," Silversmith said. "We have a variety of

positions open in restaurants and in the corporate office in Miami. We're not sure how the skills would overlap, but we're trying to have a positive and constructive dialogue."

But Coalition members are generally uninterested in fast-food restaurant jobs.

"We're not unemployed," said CIW farmworker and executive director Lucas Benitez. "We want dignity and we want them to take responsibility for the conditions we work in the fields."

The raise of one penny per pound would boost workers' wages by more than 70 percent, from about 45 to 77 cents per bushel. Under contracts negotiated with Yum Brands and McDonalds, workers will make about \$96 per day, while under contracts with Burger King, they will still make \$56 for the same weight – 4,000 pounds of tomatoes.

Emanuel, 18, came to Immokalee, Florida from Oaxaca, Mexico a year and a half ago. As the workers packed up for their trip back to Florida after the Chicago events, he said the wages under Burger King's contract are not enough to pay for rent, food and family needs. "That's why we're fighting for that one cent more," he said in Spanish. "It will make a real difference. We also need them to respect our rights."

His fellow Oaxacan, Francisco Venegas, 33, also interviewed in Spanish, said other migrant workers used to think the Coalition was "crazy," but now the Coalition is well-known and widely-supported, with achievements including the two major corporate agreements, scores of local protests to combat labor abuses, weekly meetings and a low-power radio station.

"[McDonald's] had to come to the table because they knew we were going to win," Venegas said. "Now, Burger King."

Durango, Mexico native Francisco Aragon said he has seen definite changes in working conditions in the 15 years he has been traveling back and forth between Immokalee, where the tomato season wraps up by May, and Chicago, where he sells popsicles from a cart during the summer. "We get much more respect," he said in Spanish.

Coalition supporters held rallies at several Chicago-area Burger Kings on April 13, the day they had planned to picket McDonald's corporate headquarters. McDonald's did not respond to requests for an interview.

"McDonald's and Taco Bell aren't the whole fast food world," Benitez told the crowd at the carnival, which was held in a concert venue because of the weather. "Today we are sending a message to Miami," Benitez added, referring to the city where Burger King is headquartered.

Invoking his personal hero Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Benitez said Coalition members would "walk like he would like to have seen us do, united toward a promised land."

"Right now that promised land is Miami," he continued.

"We're not going there to sunbathe, we're going to get justice.

When we're all together, those giants are afraid of us."

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