

An Unfair Food Fight: Lowering the Human Cost of Food in Immokalee, Florida

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Introduction

This debate is designed to provide students with distinct viewpoints in one of the most pressing environmental and social justice issues of our time: the living and working conditions of America's farmworkers. This case study is a loose adaptation of an actual, ongoing battle in Immokalee, Florida between migrant tomato pickers and their employers. The format of this case study will provide preliminary background information and different viewpoints of the two major parties directly involved with the issue of excessive pesticide use in Immokalee, as well as a third, expert viewpoint to offer supplemental medical and historic information.

This case study aims to demonstrate firsthand to students the true cost of our current agricultural system and norms on the nation's most invisible work force, migrant farmworkers. The need for huge amounts of crops to be grown and harvested in the shortest amount of time is standard in agricultural practices and makes human labor a commodity. The objective to simply amass more wealth inevitably dehumanizes workers and makes the gross human rights violations (that will be explained later in the case) all the more plausible.

By presenting the problem as a case debate, students can begin to understand the complexity of the issue beyond just a moralistic reasoning against pesticide use. Neither side of the debate (workers and owners) believes that the workers deserve to be treated like machinery or to suffer; however, the conflict lies in the extent of suffering to which each side believes workers are being subjected, and the costs that each side is willing to pay for agricultural production. Both sides must consider economic, historic, environmental, political, moral, and social aspects of agriculture work. Thus, students studying models of grassroots change and environmental movements will find the issues that Immokalee workers face quite relevant, mainly considering the health effects of farm work that all too often go entirely unregulated and uncompensated.

Though the harmful effects of pesticides comprise just one small aspect of the injustices that farmworkers live with, pesticides are an immediate threat to their survival. Environmental justice plays a huge role in the well-being of the farmworkers because of the disproportionate toll that pesticide use takes on workers' health. Workers' health is a key crux in the debate, and the fact that farmworkers bear a disproportionate share of the pesticide burden in food production makes the case pertinent to environmental justice.

Thus, students studying environmental movements are encouraged to read the information presented, expand upon the various perspectives, and come up with a potential compromise or adequate solution to meet both the farmworkers and the farm owners' needs. Students should think about: What are the costs and benefits to pesticide use? How can both field owners and field workers benefit from the land? In what ways can the mainstream environmental movement further consider economic, environmental, and racial justice in its strategies?

Background Information

In America today, agriculture has become largely mechanized; however, in the lush valleys of California and ripe fields of Florida, the need for farmworkers has remained steady for many decades due to the intensive manual labor required to pick and package seasonal, perishable produce¹. There are about 30,000 workers needed in Florida alone to harvest a year's crops. Work in the fields is characterized by back-breaking labor and grave hazards: injuries and deaths come from all aspects of the work, including farm equipment accidents, heat stress, snake bites, and even noise. And to compound all these other dangers, the most widespread and long-term hazard has always been pesticide exposure.

In 1939, the United States Department of Agriculture registered 32 pesticide products; by 1989, the number jumped to 729 active-ingredient pesticide chemicals². Today, according to the CDC, there are over 1,055 active-ingredient pesticides that produce over 16,000 products. The herbicides, fungicides, insecticides and nematicides that sustain the agriculture industry often contain inert ingredients that can be even more toxic than the actual pesticide³. Because nearly all commercial crops are generously doused with pesticides, these toxic chemicals directly cause chronic health problems amongst exposed workers.

The Department of Labor states that 53% of the 2.5 million farm workers in America are working illegally, as are as much as 70% of the younger farmhands⁴. Because so many of the nation's lowest-paid-jobs' workers are undocumented, the workforce becomes politically invisible, lacking all leverage such as the ability to vote and to be protected by existing labor laws. Their invisibility contributes to their inability to organize, and thus inability to begin the radical changes that will be required to make agriculture fair, safe, and healthy for the workers.

America is overflowing with more than enough food for its inhabitants, but the workers harvesting the food by hand are starving in the country's richest fields. By understanding the situation of the farmworkers on the whole, we can better assess the benefits of pesticide use compared to its costs.

Parties Involved

- Farmworkers in the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW)
- Tomato Growers in the Florida Tomato Growers Exchange (FTGE)

Supplementary Witness

- Experts – Medical doctors, sociologists, law enforcement

Debate Setting

The setting for this debate is a United States Senate Hearing, overseen by the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions⁵. This is a historic hearing, the first one ever called to investigate labor conditions in Florida's fields. Florida is the nation's largest producer of fresh tomatoes, and Immokalee is considered the state's tomato production and packing hub in the

¹ Moses 1993, 161

² Moses 1993, 162

³ Moses 1993, 162

⁴ Preston 2007, "U.S. Farmers Go Where Workers Are: Mexico"

⁵ US Congress, "Ending Abuses and Improving Working Conditions for Tomato Workers"

winter. The hearing, titled, “Ending Abuses and Improving Working Conditions for Tomato Workers,” will take place in Washington D.C. It is based on an actual hearing that took place April 15, 2008; the names of the two opposing parties were actually present at the original hearing, though their background information is fictional. The hearing focused largely on accusations of modern-day slavery occurring in the tomato fields of Immokalee, but this case debate will focus instead on how the farmworkers’ exposure to pesticides fits into the broader definition of *environmental* injustice. This is not to ignore the flagrant human rights and labor violations that the CIW accuses the tomato growers of committing, but acknowledging that major health concerns compound all the problems that workers face.

Local Setting – Immokalee, Florida

Southwest Florida is the state's busiest and most productive agricultural center, and Immokalee holds Florida's largest farmworker community⁶. Immokalee is hot and humid, a lush climate perfect for tomatoes to thrive. The city's population is 30% White, 18% African American, 1% Native American, 30% other races; Hispanic or Latino of any race are 75% of the population as well. The median income for a household in the CDP is \$24,315, and about 40% of the population lives below the poverty line. Farmworkers travel along the entire East Coast as in-season harvests change. Many migrant workers also move from agriculture and to other low wage industries, such as construction, nurseries, and tourism. There is no solid estimate of the farmworker population in Florida, and guesses vary wildly. One estimate, prepared by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services in March 1990, set an estimate of 182,790 migrant farmworkers and 252,583 seasonal farmworkers, and in the past two decades this figure has not changed significantly.⁷ However, the amount of workers certainly reflects a huge population migration each year.

Witnesses at the Hearing

Lucas Benitez, Former Tomato Worker and Co-Founder of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers

Lucas Benitez is a forty-year-old Mexican-American man from Immokalee, Florida. He comes to the hearing prepared to fight for a few basic concessions from the Growers' Exchange: a true living wage, acceptable housing, contracted labor, and a cleaner and healthier work environment. The members of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers are approximately 92% Latino (mostly Mexican, Guatemalan, and Salvadoran immigrants), 3% African American, 3% Haitian, and 2% Mayan Indian or other ethnicities. Approximately 35% are women.

Benitez came to America when he was 17 years old, hoping to earn enough money to support his parents and family back in Mexico. He began his life as a farmworker harvesting oranges and tomatoes, and today fully understands the intense labor that farm work entails. “The job of picking tomatoes is hard and heavy, dirty and dangerous. You run all day under a burning sun with a 32-pound bucket on your shoulder, carrying it from the row where you are picking to the truck where you dump it out -- and back -- that is, when you aren't stooped over picking tomatoes... Not only is your body exhausted, but so is your spirit after having to put up with the

⁶ <http://www.ciw-online.org/about.html>

⁷ Facts on Florida's Farmworkers, <http://www.floridalegal.org/facts.htm>

yelling of your supervisors all day,” he says⁸. Conditions as a farmworker are miserable, but still better than his life in Mexico, living in a clapboard shack without any hope for survival.

Benitez testifies today representing over 4,000 people that currently form the Coalition. The workers for whom Benitez speaks are desperately poor and exploited by employers for maximum labor with minimum benefits. They lack the most basic legal protections, such as fair contracting practices, minimum wage, and respect from employers, but cannot complain for fear of retaliation. There is a general stigma towards disease, which makes workers more hesitant to speak up and seek help for their health problems. Their lack of documentation makes exact numbers hard to quantify, as well as their concerns about abuses and exploitation impossible to voice individually or in an organized union, and even if they could organize, agricultural workers have more limited labor rights than industrial workers by US law. Workers know that if they complain, they will be severely reprimanded and out of work indefinitely. Thus, solid statistics on the amount of farmworkers affected each year difficult to know for certain. But the workers cannot keep silent about the conditions under which they have been forced to work any longer.

In the years since its founding in 1993, CIW has organized several successful boycotts of major fast-food corporations and demanded that these companies pay an extra penny-per-pound to workers who pick the tomatoes they buy⁹. Two fast-food companies, YUM! Brands and McDonald’s, agreed to the deal and in turn have pressured Florida’s tomato growers to take on the role of passing the extra payments on to their workers, who have thus far refused to participate.

Work on the farm is indeed arduous and deserves fair pay. Workers stoop for 10 to 12 hour workdays, picking bushels upon bushels of tomatoes each day; they must pick about one ton of tomatoes to even earn minimum wage for the day. Benitez describes in detail the atrocious housing conditions provided by the field owners – small trailers, no running water, no electricity for some. He mentions the sexual harassment of female workers and the lack of compensation for time spent waiting for tomatoes to dry and lengthy travel time to the worksite. But the most graphic descriptions come from depicting the health effects of the work environment. Not just from the smoldering heat, blaring noise of machinery, or constant buzzing and stinging of insects, but the plants themselves, doused top to bottom with pesticides, are chemical toxins surely killing the workers.

Farmworkers bear a highly disproportionate share of the burden of pesticides on Florida tomatoes, and the health effects of the pesticides are unthinkable. The short-term irritations disappear by morning, usually, but the long-term build-up of pesticides in the body causes extreme harm. Short-term effects of pesticide exposure include:

- headaches, sweating, weakness
- chemical burns, systemic poisoning
- diarrhea, vomiting
- respiratory distress

⁸ US Senate Hearing, Benitez (“Because a tractor doesn’t tell the farmer how to run the farm”)

⁹ “About CIW” <http://www.ciw-online.org/about.html>

- repetitive muscle contractions, seizures
- blurred vision, cognitive difficulties
- loss of consciousness, death¹⁰

Long-term effects of pesticide toxicity include

- a dying of the nerves
- sterility, stillbirths and spontaneous abortions
- birth defects
- permanent disability
- cancer, skin disease
- neuropathological and neurobehavioral disorders
- comas, death¹¹

Without laundry units in each home, and a constant worry of broken showers, workers and their families were left without methods of keeping pesticide residue off their skin¹². This only increases pesticide build-up and sanitation problems. The EPA estimates that farmworkers suffer from as many as 300,000 pesticide-related illnesses and injuries each year¹³, with 20,000 agricultural workers suffering from acute (one-time) pesticide-related illnesses¹⁴. Benitez cites cancer incidence data from California's Hispanic population from November 2001. In the study, the Cancer Registry of California found that Hispanic farmworkers had 59% more reports of leukemia and 69% more reports of stomach cancers than those of the general Hispanic population¹⁵.

Benitez then provides the testimony of his friend, Jose Mendoza, a farm labor contractor in the cauliflower fields of Balm, Florida. A few years ago, he and his crew entered a field to work with no notification that the crops had been sprayed less than forty-eight hours before, the minimum time safely allotted by the EPA for the strong pesticide they used on the cauliflower, Phosdrin¹⁶. The effects of Phosdrin were felt just minutes into work that fateful day; workers were screaming that their eyes burned and stung, lungs on fire, workers with headaches, vomiting, and bathed in sweat. By the end of the day, 85 workers from the farm were taken to nearby hospitals.¹⁷

Mendoza's story is just one extreme example of a potential danger of pesticide application. Such horrific stories of farm work can eclipse the horrors of everyday life. For example, Benditez shares a case of convicted indentured servitude of twenty tomato pickers in 1999 to pay off a debt. But he warns the Senate not to allow such media headlines, while important at garnering support, to overshadow the daily abuses of farmworkers. On a daily basis, 61 percent of

¹⁰ Thompson 2002, 200

¹¹ Thompson 2002, 201

¹² Thompson 2002, 175

¹³ Rothenberg 1998, 50

¹⁴ Reeves et al 2002 qtd. in López 2007, 131

¹⁵ López 2007, 132

¹⁶ Rothenberg 1998

¹⁷ Rothenberg 1998, 50

farmworkers live in poverty and earn half the average national wage. Three-fourths of farmworker housing is dangerously overcrowded, and farmworkers suffer, on a daily basis, from the highest rate of toxic chemical injuries of any workforce in the United States¹⁸.

Reginald L. Brown, Executive Vice-President of the Florida Tomato Growers Exchange

Reginald Brown is a sixty-year-old white male from Maitland, Florida, an affluent, picturesque suburb of Orlando that rests about 3-and-a-half hours away from Immokalee and is known for its many amusement parks, lakefronts, and historic sites¹⁹. Brown wears a frown of incredulity as he listens to the wild accusations being piled against him by Benitez; the CIW's gross exaggerations of working conditions echo many recent news headlines and demonstrations denouncing the "modern-day slavery" that they claim pervades the Exchange and the entire tomato industry in Florida. He can hardly believe his ears at some of the charges.

As for the allegations that the FTGE does not pay minimum wage nor care for the welfare of workers, Brown can only shake his head in bewilderment. "Just as our growers need the seeds, rain and Florida sunshine, we need the workers to harvest our crops,"²⁰ he testifies. The FTGE has always highly prized the services of their workers and compensated their hard work through fair pay and treatment. Brown believes that the voluntary return of thousands of workers to pick tomatoes for years upon years, some decades upon decades, must demonstrate that fact. Benitez raised many issues – housing, wages, working conditions, and forced labor – but each of these is clearly addressed by local and federal laws that the growers are eager to comply with.

The worst of Benitez and the CIW's charges is certainly that tomato growers have enslaved workers through debt peonage. These untrue and defamatory remarks have greatly affected public perception of the tomato industry in recent years. No one in the FTGE would ever believe that slavery is an acceptable way to get labor. On several different occasions, Brown confronted the CIW for a shred of evidence to back up harsh allegations against growers and received none, nor has the CIW brought forth such evidence to the appropriate authorities.²¹

As for the lack of fair wages, CIW boycotts and petitioning in recent years have resulted in both McDonald's and Yum!Brands offering to pay an extra penny per pound of tomatoes in order to pay workers fairly, a measure that seems both unnecessary and logistically impossible to Brown. (Tomatoes are not marked by picker and undergo intense cleaning and packaging before arriving on shelves or being delivered; thus, fast food industries can't possibly ensure that the extra penny paid per pound goes to the original workers of who packaged the tomatoes.²²) The FTGE also insists that its growers pay, on average, between \$10.50 and \$14.86 per hour to tomato harvesters. This wage is double that of Florida's minimum wage, \$6.79, and enough for a decent quality of life. Brown emphasizes that their wages are legal, competitive, and fair. In regards to housing, most of the growers provide free or inexpensive government-inspected housing that must pass government inspection. To Brown's knowledge, these growers usually also pay for

¹⁸ Thompson 2002 p, 283

¹⁹ Wikipedia, "Maitland, Florida"

²⁰ US Senate Hearing Testimony, Brown. <http://help.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Brown3.pdf>

²¹ US Senate Hearing Testimony, Brown

²² US Senate Hearing Testimony, Brown

utilities, even when workers are not picking tomatoes. He is not aware of any substandard housing in Immokalee, Florida.

Brown bristles at the idea of workers being afraid to speak up or complain against injustices. The FTGE is the only produce group in the entire country with a “SAFE” program, designed to ensure that employers treat workers fairly and pay directly. Socially Accountable Farm Employers, or SAFE, is certified and run by an independent, non-profit third party that audits growers to maintain safe and fair working conditions²³.

Brown is concerned by the descriptions Benitez provides of the results of pesticide exposure but ultimately dismisses them as rare, unfortunate but unavoidable costs of agricultural work. The worst sprays had been banned decades ago, and experts agreed that the US has made great progress toward sustainability in pesticide use. Thanks to better regulation, higher approval requirements, greater transparency and accessibility to pesticide information, *and* the constant replacement of the most hazardous chemicals, pesticides were becoming safer for everyone: consumers, employers and workers alike²⁴. Many other lines of work, such as mining, fishing, logging, and even office work, produce adverse health effects – black lung, chronic muscle pain, carpal tunnel. The farm can be a dangerous place, but every workplace has its risks.

Pesticides are essential to food production in the United States. For more than half a century, American farmers have relied on the use of synthetic chemicals, pesticides, to prevent their crops from being destroyed by microorganisms, rodents, insects, and other pests²⁵. Without pesticides, millions of Americans would absolutely starve; hunger is already a growing problem in the United States, especially with the recession, and organic growing simply will never be able to produce enough crops to feed the population. Tomatoes must be kept at a low, affordable price, because they are a staple in our diets and a source of nutrition that must be available to as many as possible. Almost half of all the tomatoes consumed in the United States year-round come from the Sunshine State, and tomato growers have had to deal with hurricanes, invasive pests, and increased competition from Mexico and Canada.

Even with all these obstacles, the fruit and vegetable industry remains crucial to Florida’s economy, second only to tourism in importance. “According to a 2006 University of Florida study, agriculture, food manufacturing and natural resource industries in Florida directly create more than 400,000 full- and part-time jobs, with a total employment impact of more than 700,000 fulltime and part-time jobs. The direct value-added contribution is estimated at \$20.32 billion, with a total impact of \$41.99 billion,” Brown explains²⁶. With this amount of jobs and revenue on the line, Florida cannot afford to have the tomato industry exported to Mexico or somewhere else offshore; thus, the FTGE cannot afford to phase out or reduce the amount of pesticides that they use. Their chemical use is already limited by current EPA regulations that are more than adequate. Four decades ago, in 1972, Congress passed the Federal insecticide, Fungicide, and Rodenticide Act that imposed strong regulations on the use of the most popular

²³ SAFE Agriculture Employer, www.safeagemployer.org

²⁴ Dernbach 2009, 306

²⁵ Newton 2009,11

²⁶ US Senate Hearing, Brown

pesticides and even banned some of the most protective, such as DDT²⁷. Before a pesticide is used on the crops, it must be EPA approved, with hundreds of tests done to guarantee that the chemical “will not present unreasonable risks to people, wildlife, fish, and plants.²⁸” Some pesticides *must* be used to ensure food security.

In general, Brown states that the average farmer in the Exchange believes he has a close working relationship with his workers. In his many years as a member of the FTGE, and now a vice-president, he has never heard a grower speak disparagingly of his workers, because they all know that without good workers, crops can’t be produced with quality; without any workers, harvesting is simply impossible. With that in mind, growers treat their workers with respect, not contempt; incentives, not punishments; and wages, not slave labor²⁹. When growers have a good harvest, the workers get great benefits in turn.

Marion S. Moses, M.D., Doctor at the Immokalee Center for Health

From her nineteen years on the job at the Immokalee Center for Health, Marion Moses has seen almost every type of work-related injury, disease, or fatality that Benitez described. From chronic back problems caused by the short-handled hoe to tractors and farm equipment accidentally maiming workers, there is no shortage of bodily injury that can occur in the fields from accidents or overwork. However, the most widespread and pressing concern for her in her time in Immokalee has always been overexposure to pesticides. She affirms Benitez’s long list of effects from pesticide exposure, and also points out the added risks for the families of workers who ingest pesticides in a variety of ways: a parent carrying the chemicals on their clothes and skin, joining parents in the fields due to a lack of childcare, or even working in the fields alongside their parents³⁰.

Children are at greater risk because the chemicals affect their smaller bodies much more quickly. They have “lower body weight, higher metabolism, and immature immune and neurological systems”, and EPA standards are based only on safe levels for adults³¹. Dr. Moses has tended to hospitalize children that felt nauseous and sick simply from their parents returning home and spending time with them. Pregnant women continue to work in the fields, and Dr. Moses has seen many birth defects and stillbirths as a result of the workers’ lack of awareness and education on the dangers of pesticides and a complete lack of regulation from employers. Many laborers live in flimsy housing located near heavily-sprayed fields, allowing pesticides to enter the body in a variety of ways: ingestion, inhalation, and constant absorption through the skin³². The lack of education on pesticides or safe pesticide training is particularly alarming, and farmworkers rarely receive either training or protective gear³³. Growers are reluctant to provide information to prevent workers from becoming overcautious or demanding protective equipment. At the same time, workers who do understand the dangers of pesticides are reluctant to complain or ask

²⁷ Newton 2009, p.11

²⁸ EPA website.

²⁹ Rothenberg 1998, 210

³⁰ Moses 1993, 163

³¹ Davis 2007, 15 qtd. in Thompson 2002, 234

³² Thompson 2002, 200

³³ Goldman 2004, 495

questions about the fields in order to keep their jobs and avoid being perceived as troublemakers or lazy³⁴.

Dr. Moses follows up her summary of pesticide's harmful health effects with a charge to the Senate to consider the racial and social context of the situation at hand. Because so many workers are undocumented, the laws passed to protect farmworkers have been weak and unenforced. For example, the law obviously forbids spraying workers directly with pesticides, but the regulation fails to necessarily protect workers on an adjacent field subject to pesticides being carried in the wind. In addition, illegal or unlicensed pesticides can still be used by state officials in emergency situations, such as an outbreak of a new pest³⁵. Loopholes and exceptions like these imply an acceptance by the agriculture industry to expose farmworkers to health-threatening chemical hazards in order to save crops.

In fact, Moses points out that environmental safety measures taken to protect the general public have even been at the further expense of farmworkers. Mainstream environmentalism is often criticized for its "Not In My Back Yard" mentality – that is, pushing the brunt of the environmental burden on someone else instead of alleviating the problem for all. In regards to pesticide use, environmentalist groups have pushed agricultural groups for tougher regulations on pesticides since Rachel Carson's book, *Silent Spring*, first informed Americans on the dangers of the chemicals used to grow our food. As a result, agricultural companies use pesticides with greater toxicity but shorter persistence. This at once provides greater protection to consumers, due to their lower toxicity, and greater risk to farmworkers who handle the freshly-sprayed produce³⁶. These measures are one example of the environmental movement further complicating the environmental problems of low-income people and racial or ethnic minorities.

Environmentalism racism is a powerful force in America, a nation that on the whole has a history of assigning the most dangerous and difficult jobs to minorities. The most obvious example in history is the maintenance of Southern plantations and Northern agriculture through African slave labor. The use of Native American lands has also been an atrocious display of power differences in the United States; corporations have bought land from various tribes for coal, oil, and uranium mining, energy-generating plants, and hazardous waste disposal sites³⁷. Though some tribes have gained greater financial security, this has been at the expense of a vastly diminished environment and consequent health risks.

Following in line with African slave labor, Native American land exploitation, and Chinese "coolie" immigrants laying the tracks of the transcontinental railroads came the Bracero program between 1942 and 1964. The program, officially called the Mexican Farm Labor Program, was implemented by Congress to make up for labor shortages on farms during World War II. It was designed to benefit temporary Mexican workers who came to work on the farms. The Mexican government made sure that workers would be paid relatively high wages and given housing, food, and medical care³⁸. Over two decades, the bracero program brought almost 5 million rural

³⁴ Thompson 2002, 202

³⁵ Newton 2009, 12

³⁶ Newton 2009, 21

³⁷ Newton 2009, 48

³⁸ Martin 1996, 62

Mexicans to rural America³⁹. The program became problematic when its immense popularity encouraged huge spikes in illegal immigration; the influx of an abundant source of labor led to lower wages, decreased benefits, worse housing, and less labor regulation. If workers complained about moldy lunches or the short-handled hoe, another worker was all too eager to take his place. Because farm wages rose at a rate 25% more slowly than that of factory workers, American workers were drawn to factory jobs without braceros. By the end of the program, Mexican workers had become the vast majority of workers in agricultural work that was balanced between Japanese, Filipino, and white workers before the war. Through “racist occupational segregation,”⁴⁰ racism played a huge role in the development of agriculture. Farmworkers are recruited from the most vulnerable members of America’s minorities.

The Debate

Begin the debate by presenting to the Senate the key concerns, strongest arguments, and main interests of each party on the issue of pesticide use and fair or unfair working conditions. After both parties have had the opportunity to summarize its main position, open the floor to discussion and ask questions from the Senatorial or expert points of view. Each party must consider the needs of the other (and for the Growers, acknowledge that a problem exists) in order to come up with fair and agreeable terms, and in the context of our society and economy today. Will the Growers Exchange agree to pay an extra penny per pound of tomatoes picked to workers? Will workers receive better housing and be hired by contracts? Look beyond the practical solutions and discuss ways to rectify the systemic injustices embedded in the agri-food system as we know it today.

Discussion and Reflection Questions

In what ways, if any, should pesticide use be increased/reduced/alterd?

Whose interests take priority in the debate: growers or pickers? Why?

How do race, class, and historical context play a role in the debate?

How and by whom can growers or employers truly have their hiring practices regulated?

How is the plight of the Immokalee workers, or all farmworkers around the country, an environmental issue? How can the environmentalist movement positively impact this debate?

What is the trade-off required between pesticide exposure versus financial security? How does this tie-in to the “jobs versus environment” narrative of the environmental movement?

How much and what kind of power does each party hold?

What, if any, compromises can be reached between the Growers Exchange and the Coalition?

³⁹ Martin 1996, 62

⁴⁰ Moses 1993, 162

Concluding Remarks

Though workers' rights activists in the 1960s, like César Chávez, expected the conditions of farmworkers to be drastically improved by now, the issue of workers' rights for farmworkers in the 21st century continues to be a struggle. Debates over illegal immigration are only intensifying the debate and further polarizing both sides. Because many workers work illegally, some growers and grower supporters believe that they do not have the right to demand fair wages or extra benefits besides what field owners and employers feel they can spare. As Reginald Brown stated, if growers didn't treat their workers fairly, they wouldn't return. However, this kind of reasoning ignores what Newton calls "job blackmail"; poor communities such as Immokalee do not have other options open for employment besides ones that present serious health and environmental hazards⁴¹. This case emphasized the hazards of pesticide use on workers but also acknowledged the need for pest control on our crops. The debate also challenges one to consider the demands of the Immokalee workers for fairer wages and safer, cleaner environments within the historical context in which they must fight to survive. The solution to the debate may require a radical revamping of our agricultural system and labor rights as we know them, but will ultimately improve the quality of life and well-being of one of the nations' most marginalized peoples.

⁴¹ Newton 2009, 47

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