Title
Tomato Workers: Harassment, Poverty, and Debt Bondage

Objective(s)
In addition to providing some information about the tomato industry as a whole, this paper will focus on the social injustices occurring mainly in Florida tomato fields. After these injustices have been identified, the paper will look at non-profits working to end debt bondage and worker exploitation in Florida and how consumers can play a part in stopping these wrongs.

Summary of Findings

Introduction to Tomato Industry

While the tomato industry in the United States spans across more than twenty different states, the majority of the market is split between California and Florida. California produces tomatoes for both processing and fresh tomato consumption, whereas Florida primarily grows tomatoes for the fresh tomato industry. Processing tomatoes – the kind used for canned tomatoes, sauces, pastes, and ketchup – dominate the marketplace with about twelve million tons produced every year, and fresh tomatoes – the kind bought in stores and used in restaurants – follow at only 2 million tons per year. When comparing just the fresh tomato industry, California harvests around 41,000 acres followed by Florida at about 38,000 acres. Although Florida harvests fewer acres annually, the sunshine state is the biggest tomato producer within the United States during the winter. Tomato season spans from October to June in FL, while California only sees harvests in the spring and fall (Boriss).

Context for Fresh Tomato Industry Problems

For a variety of reasons, Florida (as opposed to California) is particularly prone to issues surrounding working conditions in the tomato industry. Traditionally, the majority of tomato pickers hired are immigrants, undereducated, or impoverished. This precedent of hiring workers who are not likely to know their working rights, if left unregulated, makes workers particularly susceptible to exploitation. Whereas California has seen a large amount of industry regulation over the last decades, Florida has been left mainly unregulated (California Tomato Growers). In fact, until March of 2009, the governor of Florida remained largely silent about some of the most
heinous cases of exploitation in his state (Estabrook, Florida’s Slave Trade). Another cause for many of the injustices inflicted upon tomato workers is the lack of connection between tomato farmers and the workers themselves. Typically, large tomato farms are owned by farmers who hire independent contractors, or crew bosses, who then hire the tomato pickers. Using this system, farmers have little interaction with their workers and it becomes problematic because legislation often works to keep farmers accountable to safe and just working conditions and not the crew bosses (the people who primarily interact with the tomato workers).

Worker Profile

Tomato workers based in Florida are typically migrant workers who travel up and down the east coast in the tomato off-season. As well as being migrant workers, tomato pickers are also frequently immigrant workers. Many come to the United States in order to send funds to family members back home. Immokalee, FL is known as the tomato capital of the United States and is home to one of the largest farm working communities. Seventy percent of the 25,000-person town is Latino. In addition to Latino workers, many other workers identify as Haitian or Mayan Indian (About CIW).

Nature of Work

Tomato picking is naturally very strenuous work. In order to pick the tomatoes, workers repeatedly bend over, take the tomatoes from the vine, and place them into a bucket. Once the tomato bucket has been filled it weighs approximately thirty-two pounds and must be carried from the fields to the tomato trucks for transport (United States).

System of Pay

Tomato workers in Florida are paid according to a timepiece system, which means that workers are paid for the number of tomatoes harvested, not the hours they spend on the farm. For every 32 pound bucket filled, a tomato picker earns 45-60 cents. The Florida Tomato Growers Exchange estimates that pickers earn around $12 an hour from this system, however, they fail to recognize how few hours tomato pickers are actually getting paid. After a worker has arrived on the farm it is not uncommon for him/her to have to wait several hours for dew to evaporate or for the weather to stop raining. Once conditions are acceptable to begin picking it is not atypical for there to be only 3 or 4 hours left of daylight (United States). Tomato workers not only face irregular hours due to unpredictable weather, but they are not guaranteed work every day of the week. Because of crop rotation cycles, some days do not require any tomatoes to be picked and workers are left with no source of income. These inconsistencies cause tomato workers to be some of the lowest paid persons in the nation. The average income for a migrant worker is about
$11,000 a year, but tomato workers fall well below that with high average income estimations coming in around $7,000 a year and low estimations around $3,500 (About CIW).

On top of incredibly low wages workers in the tomato industry do not receive benefits of any kind. There is no employer provided healthcare, overtime is nonexistent, no security for work the next day, and the working environment is filled with violence (United States). Crew bosses are held liable for keeping farm workers productive. In order to do this they rely on violence and intimidation. It is not uncommon for employees in the tomato fields to be verbally assaulted, beaten, or, if the worker is a woman, to face sexual harassment (Black).

System of Debt

Because most tomato workers are migrant, they do not have permanent housing near the tomato fields. For this reason they often rely on farmers or crew bosses to provide them with housing. Housing provided by farmers or crew bosses often includes transportation to the tomato fields and is located in a community near other farm workers. While this may seem initially enticing, the accommodations provided for the migrant workers are rarely of a decent quality and are often grossly overpriced (United States). Landlords will frequently over inhabit houses, or force their tenants to live in single rooms, trailers, or shacks. In many cases, shelters for farm workers are so steeply priced (especially compared to the annual income of a tomato picker) that workers are forced to share just one room with ten or twelve other people. Even still, the price of housing is often too much to afford, especially when other costs are added into the equation. In addition to being charged for sub-standard housing, landlords also charge exorbitant fees for other inadequate facilities. For example, a dozen men may have to share one bathroom or there may be only one shower for an entire camp of workers. Workers are also charged for food and transportation to and from the fields. All of these costs are often too expensive for workers to keep up with and it causes a system of debt to be created for farm workers (United States).

Modern Day Slavery

This system of debt has forced many workers into the equivalent of modern day slavery. Slavery through debt bondage arises when landlords do not allow migrant workers to leave until they have paid off their debt – which is virtually impossible because these workers are earning very little money.

In one instance of slavery a twenty-three year old crew boss, Navarrete, was charged with 12 years of jail in 2007. He was found to have kept up to a dozen men locked in the back of a truck with no access to bathrooms. The men were forced to defecate and urinate in the corners of the truck. They received a shower once a week from a cold hose kept outside. Navarette was also charged with wage theft. Workers reported only receiving twenty to fifty dollars a week, sometimes nothing. If the tomato workers ventured to ask about their sporadic and decreased pay they faced beatings. Also, if a worker being ‘housed’ by Navarette attempted to escape they were
threatened with violence. Men kept by Navarette were found to have been beaten, slashed with knives, chained to poles, and kept in shackles (Estabrook, The Price of Tomatoes).

In another case, a family of three, the Evans, was convicted in 2007 on slavery charges; the head of the family received 30 years in prison. This family recruited impoverished men living in homeless shelters to their tomato farm and forced the homeless men to live in accommodations provided by the Evans. The accommodations that were provided by the Evans were located in the swamps of Florida and surrounded by a chain link fence that was covered with barbed wire. The Evans were also convicted of selling alcohol and crack-cocaine to their tenants (About CIW).

These are just two examples of an all too frequent problem in the Florida tomato industry. In the last decade, there were seven prosecuted cases of slavery and thousands of slaves freed. Experts estimate that these numbers are just the tip of the iceberg (United States).

Coalition of Immokalee Workers’ Campaigns

While any form of slavery is disgusting, several non-profit groups have begun working to end debt bondage in the tomato fields. One of the organizations on the forefront of improving working standards is the Coalition of Immokalee Workers. The CIW is a community-based organization (located in Immokalee, FL) with roughly 4,000 members. The CIW began in 1993 and it works with student, religious, labor, and community organizations in order to represent all low-paid laborers in and around Immokalee. While the CIW’s mission is to fight for fair working conditions across several industries, their two main campaigns – the Anti-Slavery Campaign and the Campaign for Fair Food – focus on issues surrounding the tomato industry (About CIW).

The Anti-Slavery Campaign is a fairly straightforward effort on the coalition’s part to end slavery in Florida. The CIW conducts investigative work to expose systems of slavery and then reports these injustices to the proper authorities (United States). They also provide outreach and counseling programs for workers who have been in involuntary servitude. While this campaign certainly is important, the CIW is quick to point out that exposing slavery only treats the symptoms, not the disease (About CIW).

In order to treat the disease the Coalition of Immokalee Workers developed the Campaign for Fair Food. In 1998, when the CIW was still young, six Immokalee organizers gathered to participate in a month long hunger strike. The purpose of the hunger strike was to pressure tomato farmers into giving workers a raise in pay. The response of the farmers being pressured was that a pay raise was impossible. Corporations purchasing large quantities of fresh tomatoes demanded low prices and the farmers had no room to pay tomato pickers more.

Through the Campaign for Fair Food, the CIW appeals directly to grocers and fast food restaurants to participate in a program that will directly pay tomato workers a penny-per-pound more (Estabrook, A Real Whopper). Although a penny does not seem like a significant amount, a single cent per pound more can increase a tomato worker’s paycheck by up to $20 more a day. Another component of the Campaign for Fair Food is a strict no-tolerance policy for tomato fields suspected to be involved in any form of debt-bondage or human trafficking. The
companies participating in the Campaign for Fair Food have all agreed to not purchase any
tomatoes from fields that might be a part of modern day slavery. To date, Yum! Brand foods,
McDonald’s, Burger King, Whole Foods, and a few other companies have all agreed to
participate in the penny-per-pound program (About CIW).

This program was designed for the corporations participating to send a check to farmers
in Florida and then for the farmers to distribute the money to their workers. However, the Florida
Tomato Growers Exchange – an organization boasting membership from about 75% of all
Florida tomato farmers – refused to participate in this system (News). While the money the fast
food industries had promised to tomato workers went into escrow accounts, the Florida Tomato
Growers Exchange threatened a $1,000 fine for any member participating in the Campaign for
Fair Food. The grower’s exchange claimed that any distribution of funds would be inherently
unfair because there is no way to track which tomatoes were picked by what worker. The
organization did not want to become legally responsible for any unequal allocation of money
(United States).

Support from Florida Tomato Growers Exchange

While the Florida Tomato Growers Exchange refused to participate in the Campaign for
Fair Food for a long time, in October of 2009 the organization changed policies and decided to
support the CIW’s penny-per-pound program. In addition to distributing the extra money to
workers, farmers who are members of the Florida Tomato Growers Exchange have also agreed
to be audited by independent non-profit groups to make sure that they are dispensing all of the
money received by Campaign for Fair Food’s participants in a just manner. The Florida Tomato
Growers Exchange has also worked to create a model for workers to pursue work related
complaints and to develop educational programs that will inform farm workers about fair wages,
hours and workplace standards (News).

The Florida Tomato Growers Exchange has also developed a program that will make
farmers more accountable for the practices utilized on their farms. The SAFE Program, Socially
Accountable Farm Employers Program, is a certification that is awarded to farmers who have
been found to provide just working conditions for their employees. SAFE certification
guarantees that a farmer has agreed to have his fields independently and frequently audited, all
working conditions have passed scrutiny, and all housing conditions have been inspected and
deemed safe (News).

Consumer Action

Although most problems surrounding tomato working conditions must be handled on the
industry level, there are a few things that consumers can do to put pressure on farmers to treat
their employees well. The first is to purchase tomatoes that are both local and in season
(Estabrook, The Price of Tomatoes). One reporter claimed that “If you have eaten a tomato this
winter, chances are very good that it was picked by a person who lives in virtual slavery (Estabrook, The Price of Tomatoes).” Consumers can also support companies who have agreed to participate in the Campaign for Fair Food and can support legislation that requires higher working standards in the tomato industry (Estabrook, The Price of Tomatoes).

Sources


