

## **Tomato workers win new pay deal. Agreement is hailed in D.C. as historic**

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From hardscrabble beginnings in a borrowed church meeting room in 1993, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers has fought to transform the way Florida's \$400 million tomato industry treats its workers.

On Friday, U.S. Secretary of Labor Hilda Solis applauded the 4,000-member group for forging a three-way agreement with East Coast Growers and Compass, the world's largest food-service company, to improve Florida tomato pickers' wages and working conditions.

"There's no question that this is the greatest victory for farmworkers since Cesar Chavez in the 1970s," said Eric Schlosser, author of best-selling "Fast Food Nation," who testified at last year's Senate hearings on Florida's tomato industry.

The late Chavez was a farmworker-turned-activist whose labor advocacy made him the public face of farmworker rights in the late 20th century.

In a Washington, D.C., ceremony, Compass joined the three biggest fast-food companies - Yum Brands, McDonald's and Burger King - and Whole Foods, the largest natural food grocery chain, to sign the agreement.

"Once we learned about the situation in Immokalee, we couldn't stand by idly," said Compass spokeswoman Cheryl Queen. "We expect this code of conduct will improve the working conditions and create change within the industry."

Coalition member Lucas Benitez characterized in a statement the accord as the future of Florida agriculture - "a future founded on mutual respect and mutual benefit, a future of common purpose among farmworkers, growers, retail food leaders and consumers. In short, it is a future of social responsibility."

Compass will pay a penny and a half more a pound for all tomatoes it buys annually. One cent goes directly to the workers; the other half-cent covers administrative costs.

Tomato harvesters will now earn 82 cents for each 32-pound bucket they pick, up from 50 cents per bucket. The raise means their annual earnings could rise from about \$10,000 to between \$16,000 and \$17,000. There are at least 30,000 migrant farmworkers in Florida, from which 95 percent of the nation's tomatoes come between October and June.

While exact numbers aren't known, the pact covers any Florida worker who picks tomatoes Compass buys.

Compass also agreed to require a strict code of conduct including a time clock system, worker education, worker input and third-party auditing. It pledged only to buy tomatoes from suppliers that agree to the raise and work standards.

In the past, the money pledged by other companies hadn't reached workers because the powerful tomato industry group, the Florida Tomato Growers Exchange, refused to pass it on, threatening to fine any member - 90 percent of the state's growers - that did. Exchange vice president, Reggie Brown, did not return calls for comment.

There's a key difference now, though: East Coast, Florida's No. 3 grower, has dropped out of the exchange in order to pay the increase.

"We're a family-owned business," East Coast vice president Batista Madonia Jr. told industry magazine *The Packer*. "Our employees are our partners; they're a critical part of our business. Trying to improve their lives is right for our business. Sometimes, doing what's right isn't what's popular. We're doing what we think is right."

Solis, the Labor secretary, acknowledged that such a partnership might seem risky in this economy, but "doing nothing is not an option. We are facing enormous challenges, but that is no excuse to let workers' rights fall by the wayside.

"Thank you for standing up for your rights. and I want to thank the business community for making workers' rights a priority," Solis said.