



## Migrant workers speak out at Florida State U.

Article from: [University Wire](#) | Article date: [November 29, 2004](#) | Author: [Lauren Walleser](#)

Lauren Walleser  
University Wire  
11-29-2004

(FSView & Florida Flambeau) (U-WIRE) TALLAHASSEE, Fla. -- Corporations must take responsibility for the ongoing human rights violations of migrant workers, creating better conditions and higher wages, migrant workers Romeo Ramirez and Gerardo Reyes Chavez told Florida State University students Monday night.

Ramirez and Chavez are members of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, a group of migrant tomato pickers from Immokalee who claim they are working to gain benefits, better wages and working conditions for themselves and other migrant workers in the United States.

The coalition is currently running the "Taco Bell Truth Tour," a protest moving throughout the country seeking to spread the word to boycott corporations such as Taco Bell and other Yum! Brands, Inc. businesses that use tomatoes picked by these workers.

Ramirez gave a historical account that explained why workers from Mexico and other countries have poured into the United States and are forced to work under such conditions.

Since the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement, American corporate giants have built factories with sweatshop-like conditions in these foreign nations, Ramirez said, putting small entrepreneurial farmers out of business and forcing them to come to the United States in order to find work to support their families.

"We as farmers in Mexico cannot compete with big corporations in the United States," Ramirez said. "What is left to do when what you cultivate and farm has no value?"

Conditions in the United States for these workers are not much better. According to Ramirez, migrant tomato pickers today work for the same wages today that they did in 1980, although the cost of living in America has risen significantly. Workers make approximately 40 cents for each 32-pound bucket of tomatoes that they pick, and must pick two tons of tomatoes each day in order to make \$50 per day. These wages are barely enough for the workers to survive themselves, let alone support their families back in their native land, Ramirez said.

"We have no benefits, no medical insurance, and there is no right to organize, especially in the fields," Ramirez said.

Chavez spoke of another type of worker that exists today in America, the "modern day slave."

According to Chavez, some workers are recruited at the borders and taken to migrant camps where they are forced to work for \$20 or less per day, depending on what the boss decides to pay them. They must also follow strict rules laid down by the bosses, and there are documented cases of violence against workers who disobey. These workers are made indebted to their bosses and work under the strict supervision of armed guards, Chavez said, and are not allowed to leave or change jobs without the risk of being severely beaten or even killed.

"This is the kind of slavery that we are talking about -- where to open your mouth for a grievance, you're going to end up dead," he said.

A video was shown following the presentation that depicted the conditions that workers are often faced with, and showed both the poverty and violence that surrounds the lives of these migrant workers.

Chavez and Ramirez encouraged students not to succumb to glamorous advertising, and to do all that they can to support the workers' cause by boycotting Taco Bell and other companies that get their tomatoes and other products from workers who are underpaid and abused.

"I am not sure why they are picking on us," Taco Bell spokesperson Laurie Schalow said. "We are one of the smallest buyers. Lots of quick-serve restaurants get their tomatoes

from that region: McDonald's, Burger King, Subway."

Schalow also claimed Taco Bell representatives have met several times with coalition members and have made efforts to help them.

Taco Bell agreed to pay a one cent per pound increase, like the coalition requested, if all the other restaurants would pay it too, Schalow said.

"We even sent them a check. They returned it," she said.

The presentation was sponsored by MEChA, Lambda Theta Phi Latin Fraternity, Theta Nu Xi Multicultural Sorority, the Puerto Rican Student Association, Students United for Peace & Justice, and the Center for Participant Education. Ramirez and Chavez had their remarks translated by FSU student Lupita Vasquez.

Students who attended the event had many questions for the workers and seemed generally motivated to do something for the cause.

"It was very compelling," FSU junior Avril Wood McGrath said. "You don't think that things like this happen anymore."

The presentation took place Monday of last week in the Student Life Building.

<!-- Photos Begin -->

photo1:

photo1 credit:

photo1 desc:

photo2:

photo2 credit:

photo2 desc:

<!-- Photos End -->

(C) 2004 FSView & Florida Flambeau via U-WIRE

Provided by ProQuest LLC. For permission to reuse this article, contact [Copyright Clearance Center](#).

---

HighBeam™ Research, a part of The Gale Group, Inc. © Copyright 2010. All rights reserved.  
[www.HighBeam.com](http://www.HighBeam.com)

The HighBeam advertising network includes: [womensforump.com](#) [GlamFamily](#)