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## Equitable Economy

### America's Tomorrow: Tomato Workers in Florida Remake an Industry

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**May 22, 2014**

#### Features

**Tomato Workers in Florida Remake an Industry**

**Five Ways to Fulfill the Economic Promise of Women of Color**



## Tomato Workers in Florida Remake an Industry

Jon Esformes, one of the largest tomato producers in the nation, is a vocal champion for a worker-led campaign to remake his industry and create good jobs for some of the most vulnerable people in America. Why? Because raising the floor for farmworkers will help grow his business and reinvigorate a once-dominant industry struggling in the face of global competition.

By forging alliances with businesses like his, all along the tomato supply chain, [the Coalition of Immokalee Workers](#) has achieved groundbreaking victories to improve wages and working conditions in Florida fields. The group has signed agreements with nearly all the growers in Florida, the nation's leading fresh tomato producer, and with a dozen of the largest tomato buyers in the world, including McDonald's, Burger King, Whole Foods and, most recently, Wal-Mart.

Wal-Mart sells about 20 percent of the nation's fresh tomatoes, and said it [will work with the coalition to extend the high-road standards to other states and other crops in its supply chain.](#)

### How fair food benefits all

The agreements are wins for all the players. For about 30,000 Florida farmworkers, most of them from Mexico, Guatemala, and Haiti, there are pay hikes of \$60 to \$80 a week during harvest season and dramatic improvements in workplace safety and dignity.

For retailers there's a public relations boost in pledging to buy only from growers who meet "fair food" standards — a promise that doesn't cost the retailers much money but that consumers value and promote on social media.

And for growers, there's lower turnover and higher productivity in the fields and an image makeover in the public eye, said Greg Asbed, the coalition's co-founder. That's no small thing for a \$650 million industry once **dubbed by a U.S. attorney** as "ground zero for modern slavery," because of repeated investigations and prosecutions for involuntary servitude and wage theft.

"The industry is better off because it's not fighting this image as one of the most regressive in the nation," Asbed said. "It's coming to be seen as one of the most progressive on human rights, and there's real value to that."

All these changes are helping to stabilize and renew an industry that had been in freefall. Florida tomato production has **declined by half** since the early 1990s in the face of competition, mainly from Mexico.

Now, for the first time in years, the industry is attracting new investment. Del Monte Fresh Produce NA, Inc. **paid \$16 million this February** to buy 2,620 acres of idle farmland to expand tomato production in the state. It was the company's second major investment in Florida tomatoes in a year.

"The natural assumption by businesses is that anytime someone is approaching them from a labor perspective, it is somehow not congruent with the direction of the business," said Esformes, a fourth-generation grower who runs Pacific Tomato Growers, which is headquartered in Florida. "What I found in the coalition was a group of people who believed in the same things we did — good working relationships and having a sustainable business. That's the basis for a partnership."

### **Building a market-driven movement**

The remarkable turnaround in relationships, standards, and industry prospects is testament to the tenacity and strategic vision of the coalition. It has fought for 20 years for fair wages and basic rights for tomato workers. Until recently, it met fierce resistance from many growers, producers, and a powerful industry group, the Florida Tomato Growers Exchange.

The coalition broke the logjam by building a market-driven movement targeting brand-name buyers like Taco Bell and McDonald's to join the Fair Food Program. As household names, these enterprises are more sensitive than growers to public relations pressure and consumer sentiment. And once a company like Wal-Mart demands higher standards for the people who grow and pick its produce, growers must comply to keep that business.

The Fair Food Program establishes a code of conduct for growers. They must provide shade and protective equipment in the fields, guarantee minimum wages, and permit worker education about their rights. The

agreements mandate rest breaks and prohibit verbal and sexual abuse, well-documented problems in the industry. They also set a "penny-per-pound" premium, paid by participating restaurants and retailers and passed through the growers to the farmworkers.

Those pennies boost [the average \\$12,000 to \\$15,000 farmworker annual income](#) by several thousand dollars, said Greg Asbed, the coalition's founder. "It pays for rent and some food every week and will continue to grow as more buyers join the program."

The agreements also establish systems for independent monitoring and complaint resolution — measures that Esformes welcomes.

"This holds us accountable," he said. "The other piece — and this is the most important to me — the relationship with the coalition is absolutely the first time there is a real acknowledgment of the cultural gap that exists between our workforce and the rights and protections that are afforded in the United States. Our workforce is an immigrant workforce, and the concept of being able to log a complaint to management or public authorities is alien. Now there's a process that's safe and secure, and there's education about that process."

A film about the coalition's work, [Food Chains](#), made its debut in April at the Tribeca Film Festival in New York, and will be released in theaters in the fall. Meanwhile, the coalition plans to take its program to Georgia, Virginia, and other tomato-growing states. The group will also begin a concerted consumer education effort to get shoppers to demand fair-food tomatoes at their local supermarkets. Ultimately, all of us have the power to strengthen domestic agriculture by improving opportunities for workers.

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## In Brief

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### The New PolicyLink.org

Did you see? Yesterday, we launched a new [PolicyLink.org](#) that is more robust, engaging, and user friendly. Find new resources and archives of our America's Tomorrow newsletters on the new [Equitable Economy page](#). And join us on [Twitter](#) to let us know what [#EquityIs](#) to you.

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### Building on the Legacy of Brown

Recruiting diverse teachers and investing in schools in our rapidly growing communities of color — that's how the nation can deliver on the promise of the historic *Brown v Board of Education* decision 60 years ago, and build a strong workforce and robust economy for years to come. In a recent *Huffington Post* commentary, Angela Glover Blackwell [lays out a strategy for equitable school funding in California](#). And a new report by the Center for American Progress explains [how to energize and infuse the teacher workforce](#) with talented and committed educators of color.

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### How to Get Beyond Broke

With black and Latino families owning [less than a dime in wealth](#) for every dollar an average white family owns, the racial wealth gap is [a significant threat to our nation's future prosperity](#). But what can we do? A new report from the Center for Global Policy Solutions and others puts forth [bold policy recommendations](#) to close the gap, promoting living wages, home mortgage principal reductions, and targeting public dollars to neighborhoods with persistent poverty.

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## The Movement for \$15 Gains Momentum

Last week, [fast-food workers from 150 cities and 30 countries](#) went on strike for a \$15 minimum wage, the largest day of protest yet in the growing campaign to raise wages. A [new report on Seattle's proposed citywide \\$15 minimum wage](#) shows it would reduce the race and gender pay gap and add over \$500 million to low-income worker households. Read our earlier piece on [how increasing the wages of fast-food workers would strengthen our economy](#).

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