

Farmworkers to Publix: A penny more can change lives

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A group picketed outside a Publix in Coral Gables on Sunday, May 18, 2014, in support of better wages and conditions for farmworkers. The group says Publix has yet to participate in the Fair Food Program, which helps farmworkers.

A penny more.

It may not sound like a lot, but to a group of about 100 people protesting outside a Coral Gables Publix on Sunday, one cent more per pound of tomatoes means shorter days, higher pay and better working conditions for the thousands of laborers who pick the crops.

"We want Publix to listen to the voices of us, as mothers, and as farmworkers," Lupé Gonzalo said in Spanish to a group outside the Publix at 1401 Monza Ave. "Because as much as they say they support families, we don't see it, as workers in the field."

Members of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers said Publix has not yet agreed to participate in the Fair Food Program, which

began several years ago as a way to ensure better treatment for farmworkers. The concept is simple: Companies buying tomatoes agree to pay a cent more per pound, which goes to the farmworker.

"We have been asking Publix to stand behind a fair wage for them and also better working conditions," Coalition of Immokalee employee Julia Perkins said. "To only buy from farms that have agreed to participate in the Fair Food Program."

On Sunday, the workers delivered a letter to the supermarket for the fourth straight year on behalf of farmworkers who are mothers. The letter asked for the chain to support the program.

In a statement, Publix said it "understands the importance of the farms and farmworkers and their contributions to the supply chain."

"Publix is currently the focus of a campaign by the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) who seek to pressure us to become involved in the employment relationship between Florida farmers who grow tomatoes and the farmworkers whom they employ to harvest their produce. Since first approached by the CIW three years ago, we have consistently viewed this issue as a labor dispute," according to the statement.

The protestors, however, view it differently. Holding signs trumpeting "Farmworkers Justice" and "One Penny" and chanting in English and Spanish ("Hey, Hey, Ho, Ho, Exploitation's Got to Go"), the group spread the word to the store's customers doing their workweek

shopping.

Nely Rodriguez, who is originally from Mexico and lives Immokalee in Southwest Florida, said the Fair Food Program has drastically improved the lives of field workers.

“Things are much better, but there is still more to do,” she said in Spanish.

Rodriguez said the group is focusing on Publix because the retail chain is a major player in Florida. The workers chose the Coral Gables store to make their statement because of a food-industry industry event that brought people to the area. The group also has protested at other Publix stores throughout the state.

“They have an image of supporting families,” said the mother of three. “They should use their power.”