

# **I AM NOT A TRACTOR!**

How Florida Farmworkers Took On  
the Fast Food Giants and Won

**Susan L. Marquis**

**ILR PRESS**

**AN IMPRINT OF**

**CORNELL UNIVERSITY PRESS ITHACA AND LONDON**

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First published 2017 by Cornell University Press

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Marquis, Susan L. (Susan Lynn), 1960– author.

Title: I am not a tractor! : how Florida farmworkers took on the fast food giants and won / Susan L. Marquis.

Description: Ithaca : ILR Press, an imprint of Cornell University Press, 2017. |

Includes bibliographical references and index. |

Identifiers: LCCN 2017035097 (print) | LCCN 2017035883 (ebook) |

ISBN 9781501714313 (pdf) | ISBN 9781501714306 (epub/mobi) |

ISBN 9781501713088 (cloth : alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Coalition of Immokalee Workers. | Agricultural laborers—Florida—Immokalee. | Agricultural laborers—Labor unions—Florida—Immokalee. | Food industry and trade—Florida—Immokalee—Employees.

Classification: LCC HD1527.F6 (ebook) | LCC HD1527.F6 M37 2017 (print) |

DDC 331.88/130975944—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017035097>

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## GETTING TO IMMOKALEE

Late spring 2009 and I've been carrying the March issue of *Gourmet* in my bag for a couple of months. "Mind, Body, and Seoul. Korean food is America's next new cuisine." "Easy Does It. Sometimes all it takes is a simple roast chicken . . ." One of the values of yet another flight across the country is the chance to catch up. "A World Away. Stretching west from Castile toward the Portuguese border . . ." Truth be told, I'm a good cook. I'd broadened my food magazine selection to include more "sophisticated" journals such as *The Art of Eating*, but *Gourmet* had been there the longest, an old friend for stolen moments on the road or after a busy day . . . letting the image of "communal tables filled with soul-satisfying food and new-found friends" fill my head.

Somewhere over Oklahoma and flipping to page 40. "The Price of Tomatoes. If you have eaten a tomato this winter, it might well have been picked by a person who lives in virtual slavery." I knew Barry Estabrook had long been a contributing editor at *Gourmet* with his *Politics of the Plate* features, but this article was different. Estabrook opens with what I have since learned is a signature of writing about Immokalee, Florida, and the migrant workers there. He describes the jarring transition when driving from Naples to Immokalee. In thirty-five miles or so you travel from multimillion-dollar homes, Saks Fifth Avenue, and luxury golf course after luxury golf course through the Corkscrew swamp at the north end of the Everglades, past tomato fields and orange groves partially hidden behind scrub oak, palmetto, and sand berms, into the trailers, low-rise apartments, small single-family homes with more than a few cars up on blocks,

and the bars and bodegas that make up most of Immokalee. The scruffiness and poverty are worse than most, but the cars up on blocks, drainage ditches, and burned-out grass look a lot like much of rural southwest Florida. But it was not the scenery that caught my attention in Estabrook's article. It was the story of unrelenting abuse of farmworkers, of modern-day slavery, complete with beatings, wage theft, and workers locked in the back of a box truck that served as their "home." These workers were not in Thailand or Mexico or Kenya. They worked on tomato farms in Florida. And the setting was not the pre-Civil War or Jim Crow South; it was 2009.

Tucking the copy of *Gourmet* into my bag, I was thinking through what I had read, but I needed to turn to other matters. As it turned out, I was headed to Naples to touch base with one of the board members of the graduate school where I'd recently been appointed dean. After fifteen years with the Department of Defense leading warfare and operational analysis organizations and a half dozen years running a defense, healthcare, and analysis group in a Washington, DC, nonprofit, I had been ready to try something new. The stars aligned, and in late 2008 I had joined the RAND Corporation, not as a national security expert but as the dean of the Pardee RAND Graduate School, the oldest and largest public policy PhD program in the United States. David Wang was on the school's Board of Governors, and he was ready to step down with the arrival of a new dean.

I soon found myself in an elevator headed to David Wang's penthouse apartment. Once inside, looking across the vast expanse of his living room, with its sharp-edged formal furniture, I had a hard time making out his features. He sat in shadows that contrasted with the glare of Naples sunshine flooding through the floor-to-ceiling glass windows that looked out onto the Gulf of Mexico. David Wang had immigrated to the United States at the close of World War II, joining his father, a pioneer in nuclear physics in China, who had served as an envoy to President Roosevelt at the behest of the Chiang Kai-shek government. An engineer by training, with a long and successful career at Union Carbide and International Paper, David is a formal, somewhat impatient man. He gave little indication that he looked forward to our meeting. Struggling to find a connection, I made uncomfortable small talk mixed with his brusque interrogation about the Pardee RAND Graduate School. As the minutes crept by, he made a reference to work he was doing with an agricultural workers group. "The tomato pickers in Immokalee?" I asked (mispronouncing the name as "Immikley"). Intrigued, David responded, "Yes, yes, in Immokalee [rhymes with "broccoli," it turned out]. I've been working with the Coalition of Immokalee Workers for years." My old friend *Gourmet* saved the day and set me on the journey that yielded this book.

Where does our food come from? Like many others, I've become more thoughtful over time about the food I eat. At some point I moved beyond aspirations to dine in high-end restaurants or track down unusual ingredients. I try to keep it local and seasonal and have learned to get to know the farmers at the markets. And professionally, I knew that large-scale industrial agriculture can feed the world with "cheap food" but has hidden costs that any good economist will tell you must be taken into account: costs to the environment and in community health. This is the agricultural system version of the total cost accounting I had worked on when looking at major weapon systems in the Pentagon. But as I learned to take into account the costs to the soil, costs to the air, pesticides, antibiotics, obesity, food security, and the treatment of animals, the piece that was missing was the farmworkers. The people who put the food on our tables. For "foodies" and those who just care about what they serve their families, journalist and author Eric Schlosser was one of the first to raise his voice and point out this blind spot. Schlosser stood up and said, "I'd rather eat a tomato picked by fairly treated labor than an organic tomato picked by a slave."

In the months that followed my trip to Florida, I began to read more about the Coalition of Immokalee Workers and their Campaign for Fair Food. What was this farmworker organization fighting for and how did it ever cross their mind to take on fast-food chains like Taco Bell, Burger King, and McDonald's? Why did the CIW think these corporate giants were key to increasing farmworker pay or eliminating the violence and abuse in the fields that Barry Estabrook, Eric Schlosser, Kevin Bales, and Ron Soodalter wrote about? And where was the government in all of this? As I came to understand, the problem of agricultural labor, particularly fair and humane pay and working conditions for the farmworkers in the fields, had been with us since our nation's founding. Slavery, immigrant workers, African American workers in the Jim Crow South; the source and color of the workers changed over time but in many ways conditions in the fields were nearly as brutal in twentieth-century America as they had been at the time of the Civil War. They were just less visible as Americans became increasingly removed from the source of the food on their tables, selecting fruits and vegetables from brightly lit produce displays in grocery stores. Did the CIW really have a solution that would make a difference in workers' lives? Was it really possible that farmworkers themselves, as a community, could successfully take on agricultural labor problems that have existed throughout the history of United States? As I came to learn, the answer is yes. There is a reason to tell and to read this story. At a time when there is great frustration that we seem to be making no progress in solving most of the persistent and complex problems facing our world, the Fair Food Program works. The Coalition of Immokalee Workers has transformed the tomato fields from the worst agricultural labor situation in the United States to

the best. There is victory in this. There is also the promise of expanding what the CIW has done far beyond the tomato fields to other agricultural workers and even to industrial and low-wage labor more broadly. To achieve the potential of the Fair Food Program, we need to know how we got here and why this has worked when so many other efforts have not. This is what *I Am Not a Tractor!* is about.

As David Wang and I connected on these issues and possibilities, he introduced me to Greg Asbed, Lucas Benitez, and Laura Germino, three of the principal cofounders of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers. I visited Immokalee for the first time, making that drive from Naples to the CIW's offices on Second Street. I saw the chickens in the yards, workers lined up to get food from a local charity, and the black mold on the walls of the one-room apartments with six mattresses stacked waiting for the workers to return from the fields. I also saw the banner that had first announced the Coalition, "¡Una Sola Fuerza! [loosely translated as Strength in Unity!] The Coalition of Immokalee Workers."

I also read more about agricultural working conditions not only in Florida but across the United States. For most of our nation's history, we've struggled with the role and place of agricultural labor in our democracy, and in particular the treatment of the men and women who grow and harvest the food we eat. Our history is a troubled one that didn't end with the Thirteenth Amendment and the conclusion of the Civil War. The more than four million slaves that worked the sugar cane, tobacco, rice, corn, and particularly cotton fields of the South became the sharecroppers and agricultural workers who worked the land and never seemed to earn enough to cover their debt to the landowners.

In the West, a different story unfolded, or at least a new variation on the story of American agriculture. Open spaces and fertile land offered the possibilities of large-scale farming. Western farmers, particularly those in California, quickly saw the advantage of an immigrant workforce that would provide temporary and seasonal labor. Mexican immigrants came first, after the end of the Mexican-American War in 1848. Chinese immigrants soon followed when the demand for Western produce grew in the East with the opening of the transcontinental railroad in 1869. By 1882, Chinese immigrants provided more than 50 percent of the agricultural workforce in California. This situation changed at the turn of the century, when the US Congress passed exclusionary legislation limiting both Chinese immigration and the ability of existing Chinese immigrants to work in the United States. The loss of Chinese workers did little, however, to slow the development of large-scale commercial agriculture in California. The need for labor was massive, and new sources of immigrant labor from the Philippines and Japan, as well as a resurgence of Mexican workers, picked up the slack. Each new wave of immigrants was willing to accept lower wages and accept worse living

conditions than those who came before. This pattern of immigrants providing cheap agricultural labor, US citizens feeling the work was beneath them, and xenophobia pushing out one immigrant group to be replaced by the next was repeated time and again.

By 1930, Mexican seasonal workers and Mexican Americans made up 80 percent of the harvest labor in California, following the harvest and then returning to their homes in the Southwest or in Mexico. The Great Depression saw new restrictions on immigrants and an attempt to attract American workers, but the legendary “Okies” who traveled to California looking for work couldn’t meet the labor demand and the wages promised were often not realized. With the Second World War, domestic farm labor was again in short supply and Mexican immigration increased once again, encouraged by the Bracero Program, which facilitated a steady supply of Mexican farmworkers until the Kennedy Administration ended it in 1964. The ending of the program did little to change the makeup of the western workforce, particularly in California. To this day, the great majority of California produce is harvested by Mexican immigrants.

If western farming, particularly in California, drew on a vast pool of poorly paid immigrant labor, the southern and southeastern states continued to leverage the legacy of slavery, adding a particularly grim twist as Reconstruction came to an end. Formerly enslaved African Americans and their descendants provided most of the labor on larger farms and plantations. Southern farmers preferred to hire black agricultural laborers who were willing to work for lower wages, and southern whites considered farm labor beneath them and were unwilling to work alongside freed slaves. Unlike the migrant workers in California, farmworkers in the South were less mobile, tied to the land through sharecropping and debt peonage. It was not uncommon for African Americans to be tricked or coerced into signing contracts as field workers or sharecroppers. Farm owners held the workers’ pay and took out money for expenses from the company store, for seed and supplies, and other debts. Workers were often not paid for the work they were doing. When their contracts concluded at the end of the year, sharecroppers and farm workers still owed money. The penalty for nonpayment was jail, so they kept working in the hope of paying off what they were told they owed.

Farmers and other employers worked with county sheriffs and state prison officials to develop the southern innovation of convict labor and debt bondage. Local authorities were allowed to “bind out” to local farmers anyone convicted of a crime, felonies and misdemeanors alike, and unable to pay off their fines. Courts would even skip the intermediate step of a fine and impose penalties of fixed terms of labor, particularly during the harvest season. Convict leasing began in Mississippi just after the Civil War ended and quickly spread across the southern states, establishing strong roots in Florida and Alabama. Historian

David Oshinsky points out that as Florida's agricultural industry took off in the late 1800s and early 1900s, first with turpentine and then citrus, and Florida's interior developed the infrastructure needed to support the new industries, the southern practice of convict leasing "turned a serious problem (the punishment of troublesome ex-slaves) into a remarkable gain." The economic benefits went to the growers and other employers, to brokers between the prisons and the producers, and to the state and local governments that benefited from this new source of revenue. Convict leasing provided a functional replacement for slavery that was, if anything, even more brutal without the brake of ownership investment. Oshinsky quotes one southern employer of convict labor: "Before the war we owned the negroes. If a man had a good nigger, he could afford to take care of him; if he was sick get a doctor. He might even put gold plugs in his teeth. But these convicts: we don't own 'em. One dies, get another."

Florida and Alabama were the last two states to allow the leasing of state convicts. But when Florida ended the leasing of state prisoners in 1919, the county jails were quick to help with a steady supply of cheap labor, rounding up African American men for petty or nonexistent crimes when it was time for the harvest. When the leasing of even county prisoners was outlawed in 1923, enterprising sheriffs used a version of debt peonage to provide growers with an able-bodied and cheap workforce. Once arrested, men were assessed exorbitant fines that they worked off in the groves or work camps.

Convict leasing and debt peonage from courthouse fines were not the only ways to maintain cheap labor in the southern states. Tenant farming and sharecropping had their own variation of debt peonage and wage theft. Wages were low. Workers were at the mercy of farm and packing house owners in terms of what they were paid and what they might owe. By the early 1960s, little had changed in the southeastern states. Workers were black and poor and it was often a buyer's market, with more people who wanted to work than the fields and groves required.

The opportunity for change had come during the Great Depression. Concerned for the state of workers in the United States, Congress passed two foundational pieces of labor legislation: the National Labor Relations Act of 1935 and the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938. The first gave workers the right to organize, join unions, and engage in collective bargaining. The second piece of legislation set basic standards for the fair treatment of workers that are still followed to this day: minimum wage, overtime compensation, the maintenance of timekeeping and other records, and significant limits on child labor. The American public, perhaps spurred on by early investigative journalists like Upton Sinclair or later by the documentary photographs of the Depression by Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange, had focused on the abuses found in poor working conditions and

pay for factory and processing plant workers in an increasingly industrialized economy. Congress's passage of these landmark labor laws was a transformational moment in US labor relations and working conditions.

True enough. But two groups had been deliberately excluded from the new legislation: domestic workers and agricultural workers. They were excluded because of negotiations between the authors of the legislation and southern congressmen needed for passage of the bills. Blacks were the South's farmworkers and domestic servants. The congressmen were adamant that black farmworkers or "field hands" and domestic servants be excluded from any guarantee of labor rights, and this exclusion and separation from a broad category of labor laws and regulations has largely continued to this day. The National Labor Relations Act excluded agricultural laborers through its definition of an employee: "shall not include any individual employed as an agricultural laborer." The Fair Labor Standards Act extended this exclusion, defining agriculture broadly to include cultivation, harvesting, dairying, raising of livestock or any animals, and forestry, and anything related to those, such as delivery or storage for markets. In 1966, the Fair Labor Standards Act was amended to prohibit children under sixteen from "hazardous" agricultural work and to require minimum wage for farm work, although the minimum wage was lower for agricultural workers until 1977. The requirements for minimum wage for farm work are not as strict as for factories or other employment and do not require overtime pay. And minimum wage is difficult to track without timekeeping systems and when farmworkers are hired through contract labor agents and work in fields far from the eyes of farm managers. To make it even more difficult to track down violations of farmworkers' legal rights, there are still but a handful of inspectors from the Wage and Hour Division in the individual states, most speak only English, and, although there have been some improvements, many spend most of their time with the growers rather than in the fields.

Farmworkers lack the common benefits of health insurance, disability insurance, paid time off, or any sort of retirement benefits. Most have no access to social safety net programs such as SNAP/food stamps, workers' compensation, Social Security, or Medicaid, even though if they are on the payroll they are paying taxes into these systems. And agricultural work is one of the most dangerous occupations in the United States, with an exceptionally high death rate and exposure to pesticides and chemical poisoning.

In 1960, Edward R. Murrow introduced *Harvest of Shame*, his devastating documentary exposé of agricultural labor in the southeastern states. The setting was Immokalee: "This is not South Africa, or the Congo. This is a scene from America, home to the best fed people in the world." As he speaks, we see a crowd of African American workers bidding to work in response to the call of

crew leaders, and then crammed into the backs of trucks to head into the fields outside of Immokalee. An Immokalee grower comments on the scene, observing, in an echo of Oshinsky's employer of convict labor in 1883, "We used to own our slaves. Now, we just rent them."

Into the 1970s, Immokalee's and Florida's farmworkers were largely African American, in direct contrast to farmworkers in the western states who were primarily from Mexico. Not until the late 1970s, as African Americans left agriculture for other industries, did the demographics change and the number of immigrant workers increase. Haitians, later followed by Mexicans, as well as others from Central America, particularly Guatemala, largely replaced the African American workforce. By the 1990s, farmworkers in Florida were mostly young immigrant men.

Lucas Benitez was one of those young men. Seventeen years old, he had family in Immokalee and the pay sounded good. "They told me how it was difficult in Immokalee, but they didn't tell me the whole story. I had been working the fields [in Mexico] since I was six years old . . . [and] I was ready to work hard." It had been dark when Lucas first showed up in the Pantry Shelf parking lot, joining the crowd of mostly men looking for work. Lots of Haitians plus others from Mexico and Guatemala. Parking lot lights cut through the predawn gloom as the men gathered around the crew leaders looking for the strongest and youngest for their harvesting crews.

He was in. Onto the bus and out to Immokalee's tomato fields. Lucas knew what hard work was. He also understood the dignity in it. "My dad worked very long days but every night he sat with us kids, five boys and a girl. We talked and he told stories. My dad said, 'remember, we are poor but we have something very important. We have our labor. The rich people of the world have storehouses of money. If you don't go to work, this money doesn't work. You need to ask a reasonable price for your labor. You do not give it for free.'"

Lucas's dad taught his children well, but his message hadn't quite made it to Immokalee. "When I came to Immokalee, I saw the cheap price for labor, verbal abuse, physical abuse, and sexual abuse." But at seventeen there wasn't much Lucas could do about it. First, he needed a job and he needed money. So into the fields he went, where he was fast and could keep going forever.

It's November now, and the first planting of tomato plants was growing fast in the heat. Lucas remembers: "I was staking tomatoes. You did this by the hour, not a piece rate. I saw that my coworkers were slow and I was going fast. I finished a row and waited ten minutes for the other workers. A big truck arrived. 'Hey,' [the crew leader yelled], 'what are you doing?'"

Lucas replied, "Waiting for the crew."

“Go back!” the crew leader shouted. His whole life, Lucas had never liked if a boss yelled at him, particularly when he wasn’t doing anything wrong. He had his dignity.

“No.” Lucas wasn’t moving.

“I said go back, motherfucker!”

“No, motherfucker.”

Looking back, Lucas still can’t quite believe the scene in that tomato field. “I think it was the first time any worker said ‘motherfucker’ to him. I was about 120 pounds then. This guy was about 300 pounds and six feet tall. He was called ‘El Picudo’ after the bird that bites at you and that you should be afraid of.”

The crew leader climbed from the truck, furious at the upstart kid. “What did you say?!”

Lucas didn’t budge. “What you heard.”

Lucas continues: “The guy went to hit me and then saw I had a [tomato] stake in my hands. I said, ‘Hit me! If you hit me, you will definitely get one of my hits back.’”

Welcome to Immokalee.

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## **TO BEAT ONE OF US IS TO BEAT US ALL!**

God, it was frustrating, but the two knew they were in the right place. When Greg Asbed and Laura Germino looked out the window of the small storefront office, they faced the cracked asphalt, broken concrete dividers, and courageous weeds that made up the Pantry Shelf parking lot. Throughout the day, the occasional beat-up Ford or rusted Chevy would pull in, seeking the shade of the grocery store wall. But most were walking. Women, arms loaded with bags, walked out the market's doors and down streets patterned by the shade of trees loaded with Spanish moss and the glaring sun of southwest Florida. Some carried fruit that reminded them of home in Haiti, but most were carrying the soda, chips, and other junk food that was cheapest in the overpriced market.

The two paralegals, who made up two-thirds of Florida Rural Legal Services' Immokalee operations, had to arrive early if they wanted to witness the reason for this unincorporated town's existence. Immokalee was effectively a labor reserve for the big citrus, pepper, tomato, and other produce farms that filled the interior of the state. In the dark of predawn, a hundred or more (mostly) men shifted from one group to the next, clumped around the late-model pickups, the harshness of the headlights emphasizing the exhaustion on their faces. Men stood in the beds of the trucks or on the concrete dividers, shouting in Spanish and English, and indicating with a jerk of the head, a wave of a thumb, that the lucky souls could board the worn-out buses waiting there. If you didn't get on the bus, you weren't working that day.

Greg Asbed and Laura Germino were here because of this flood of farmworkers. If you were going to work with farmworkers, if you believed it was possible to take on one of the most intractable labor issues in the United States, Immokalee was the place to be. Laura had seen the opportunity first. Over and over again she heard the name: Immokalee. Working intake for the farmworkers picking apples in the mountainside orchards outside of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, she kept writing it down as the migrant workers gave Immokalee, Florida, as their permanent address. Laura had just returned to the United States after serving with the Peace Corps. And what she saw was troubling. First with the workers in Pennsylvania's apple orchards and later with the migrant workers arriving in Maryland, Laura learned more about the working and living conditions of those who moved up and down the East Coast, following the seasons and the crops. "Poor" was the kinder term. "Beaten down" seemed like a better fit. Three things became increasingly clear: outside of the workers, few seemed to care about their plight; conditions were bad everywhere; and Florida in particular was an arena of untrammled abuse. Even as she worked for the advocacy nonprofit Friends of Farmworkers, it wasn't clear that her work—or the work of similar activist groups—was doing much to improve the lives of farmworkers.

While Laura was in Burkina Faso, Greg had been in Haiti. He was now in graduate school. When Greg and Laura found time together, their conversation returned time and again to two subjects: the seemingly insurmountable challenges facing farmworkers and the profound lessons Greg had learned during three years in Haiti. Stepping off the plane in Port au Prince, Greg had been reasonably sure this was not what the other neuroscience majors from Brown University had been preparing for. Haiti was in the turmoil of the last six months of the twenty-eight-year Duvalier family dictatorship. That was followed by Duvalier's overthrow and two-and-a-half years of military junta, when the real violence and instability broke out. Undaunted, Greg joined in, becoming part of the grassroots movements building in protest across the island. The protests weren't the blindness of angry mobs, but Greg realized instead that communities were organizing themselves. Most importantly, the organization was done from the inside; it was community-led action, declaring the right to jobs and housing and their right to elect the nation's president. When Jean-Bertrand Aristide reclaimed the presidency from the military junta, these community groups cheered the victory they helped make possible.

Now, back in the United States, Greg asked, "What if?" The conversations he and Laura were having converged. What if instead of concerned outsiders advocating for workers, the workers themselves came together as a community? What if instead of legal aid groups fighting individual legal battles, playing

whack-a-mole with those caught violating the law, the workers' community fought for their human rights? What if the lessons of Haiti were applied in the farm fields and communities of the United States? What would change then? And could it be done?

It was increasingly apparent that Immokalee was the key. It was the hub of the East Coast farmworker community, the source of the river of migrant workers that flowed from Florida to Maine. And while issues of wage theft, dilapidated housing, and poor working conditions existed in all of the eastern farming communities, the abuse was greatest, the conditions harshest, in Florida. If anyone was going to shed light on the treatment of farmworkers, Greg and Laura knew it had to be there. So, like the immigrants who flooded into Immokalee each season, the two Brown graduates looked for a way to get there.

"Community specialist paralegals," that's what the Florida Rural Legal Services advertisement said. Florida Rural Legal Services, FRLS (sometimes jokingly referred to by themselves as "Frills"), was one of those organizations, like Friends of Farmworkers, inspired by *Harvest of Shame*. The legal advocacy group had been founded as a branch of the Legal Services Corporation in 1966. The often Ivy League-trained lawyers who moved to Florida or other rural areas believed in the power of the courts and in attacking farmworker abuse and exploitation as a series of legal violations. FRLS worked through "impact litigation," social change through the law. FRLS took on cases of migrant worker abuse, usually representing a single worker or small group working for the same employer. The most frequent violation was wage theft, but they also went after cases of unsafe working conditions and overcrowded and filthy housing. At the time, FRLS also helped workers get their immigration documentation. Three lawyers and six paralegals made up the FRLS troops representing a half-million Florida farmworkers. In the early 1990s, one of these lawyers and two paralegals ran the "Immokalee district," which covered about half the state. For FRLS, success was winning reparations for their worker clients related to specific legal violations. Success required workers willing to come forward to file the case and then all the complications and delays of working through the court system.

Let's be clear up front: Laura and Greg weren't heading to Florida to join in the FRLS program of addressing specific violations of laws rarely enforced when the victims were migrant workers. Not at all. Whether it was vision or cluelessness, they were headed to Immokalee in hope of effecting cultural change in the direction of human rights and dignity, and not for a single victim at a time but for the entire community of workers. The two did not hide their purpose: "We gave FRLS fair warning. We were coming down [to Florida] to work with the community on self-directed change." Despite this warning, or perhaps recognizing that there weren't that many people with Greg and Laura's experience and training willing to

settle into Immokalee, Florida Rural Legal Services hired them. It quickly became apparent that FRLS hadn't realized what they had signed up for.

Laura, of course, knew Florida. Though she grew up in Virginia, Laura is a fourth-generation Floridian and spent her summers as a child there. She knew the light and beauty of the Atlantic beaches not far from Deland. She knew warm nights with grown-ups on the porch while she raced around barefoot with her cousins during summers spent with Granny. She knew also the darkness of Florida, hidden from beachgoing winter visitors: early childhood memories as segregation ended, kicking and screaming, and unsettling stories Granny told about Florida's not-too-distant past. Pulling into the parking space next to the FRLS office, Greg and Laura were greeted by the same Immokalee that greeted the flood of new and old immigrants completing their long and crowded van rides from Arizona and Texas at the start of the season in late September. Like the rest of Florida, Immokalee offered the workers, Greg, and Laura both light and dark. The promise of work and the possibility of effecting real change mixed with the reality of abusive working conditions and growers who had been running their farms the same way for a long time and had little interest in doing things differently.

Arriving in Immokalee, Greg and Laura showed up with the commitment you'd expect from all who worked for Florida Rural Legal Services, people who picked up their lives to fight for migrant farmworkers. But Greg and Laura brought something else, something new to the equation. Experience working in struggling "Third World" communities was a plus. After all, as one observer noted, up through 1969 "the Peace Corps used Immokalee as a training area for people who were going to the Third World [and] it seemed like the Caribbean coast of Costa Rica even in the early 1990s." Immokalee's newer immigrants were from Mexico and Guatemala, joining the Haitians who had begun to arrive over the previous decade. English was rare. Spanish was often a second language at best. Greg's and Laura's ability to speak Haitian Creole and Spanish was invaluable. Along with suitcases and duffel bags, they brought to Florida their experience and the intelligence to apply what they had learned in new ways in a new world.

Many days at FRLS, the incessant demands of trying to right the often routine, and too frequently gross, abuse of Immokalee's farmworkers threatened to overwhelm the small staff. The lawyer and the two paralegals pushed against a tide that had rolled in a hundred years before and always seemed to be flowing in one direction. There was a never-ending stream of workers coming to the office to report not being paid, crew leaders who subtracted "taxes" or "Social Security" from workers' pay and pocketed the money, crummy housing, and the risk of being beaten if you dared complain.

It could have played out in two ways. Helping this steady stream of clients could take over all available intellectual and emotional energy. Recovering a few

hundred dollars in back pay or assisting a Guatemalan worker in getting his work permit and legal documentation were victories. But these small, albeit real, victories were not why Greg and Laura had moved to Immokalee and not why they stayed. Small victories were not why Greg and Laura were patiently taking the time to become part of the community, talking and listening with workers not only in the FRLS office but also in the housing areas, on the steps leading to overcrowded trailers, and on the corners near convenience stores. They learned about price gouging in Immokalee's stores, exorbitant rents, and little to do when there was no work. At some level, to understand what is to come, it might be helpful to understand Greg Asbed and Laura Germino. There's an intensity there, grounded in deep belief. This belief was in the need to take a different approach if farmworkers were ever going to be able to positively change their lives, and a belief that focusing on the community was the first step in attaining this objective. The strength of Greg and Laura's belief resulted in an unswerving commitment to fighting this fight. Come to think of it, this same determination and persistence in commitment is the characteristic that ties them all together: Greg, Laura, Lucas, Gerardo, Steve. But first things first. Let's start with Greg and get to know each in turn.

Settling in at the table at the shop in Ave Maria, the closest "real" coffee shop to Immokalee, it doesn't take long to see that Greg Asbed is one tightly wound, highly physical man. Spend some time talking with him and you'll see that all that barely controlled energy is linked to a tremendous analytic intellect. This is not the scattered energy of hyperactivity. This is the tightly focused energy of someone who is confident he knows where true north lies. Leaning forward, hands tight on his knees, there are things to be said, things to be explained. There's a lot going on: Walmart, Pacific Growers, training, audits. So much finally happening that it all comes out in rapid fire. Look, he says, here's what you need to understand.

Greg reads everything and is an accomplished writer, having published academic book chapters, commentaries in traditional newspapers such as the *Los Angeles Times*, and online in blogs including the *Huffington Post*. Greg is an avid basketball player and a fanatical Dallas Cowboys fan. Both are essential to keeping Greg sane in the midst of twenty-five years fighting this battle and figuring out how to make it work. With some pride in his willingness and ability to do hard physical labor, Greg waxes rhapsodic when telling of the skill and talent of the CIW's much-sought-after watermelon harvesting crew that he worked on for years. It is not hard to imagine what he dreams of when tossing or catching a melon.

Born in Baltimore and raised in Washington, DC's suburbs, Greg attended the prestigious Landon School before heading to Brown. But, like many Americans,

Greg traces his family history to immigrants arriving in Baltimore in search of a better life. Greg's history is just a bit more recent than some. After seeing all but her older sister killed in their village of Izmit by Turkish gendarmes during the Armenian genocide in 1917, Greg's grandmother Hripsimee survived a five-hundred-mile forced march and was then sold by Turks to itinerant Kurds, who in turn sold her to another Armenian family fleeing Turkey into Syria. The two goats and a single coin paid for her as a child bride also likely saved her life and resulted in the son who became Greg's father, Norig Asbed. Settling in what is now Kobane, Syria, Norig revealed himself to be a brilliant student. Upon his completing the village's parochial school, the village supported Norig's enrollment at age eleven at the Melkonian Institute in Cyprus, a school for Armenian children. Norig was unable to return to Kobane and his family for six years. When he did, he taught at the local school and elsewhere in the Middle East, eventually becoming a student of nuclear physics with Nobel laureate Niels Bohr and then taking on doctoral studies and completing his master's degree at the University of Maryland and Johns Hopkins University. Norig fell in love with Ruth-Alice Davis, a noted pediatrician and early woman graduate of Columbia University's medical school, who was chief of the maternal and child health clinic at Johns Hopkins Hospital while Norig was in graduate school.

When Greg talks about his grandmother's strength as a young girl in the face of so much violence and fear, his pride in his father's overcoming poverty, and his admiration for his mother's work in the Philippines and in public health in Maryland, it is evident that this history is still very much alive and running through his veins. Out of his family's history grows a strong sense of the risk of the vulnerability of immigrants, anger at injustice, and a belief in the strength of community. Greg's anger combines with respect for the courage and hard work of the farmworkers, a respect born of eighteen years harvesting watermelons side-by-side with other CIW members from Florida to Missouri.

It's worth talking for a moment about those watermelons. Harvesting watermelons is hard. Unbelievably hard. You may remember Edgerrin James, an all-pro running back who played for the University of Miami and then for the Indianapolis Colts. James was raised in Immokalee and harvesting watermelons was, as he lets us know, "the highest-paying job I had before my \$49 million one with the Colts." The point here is that when James showed up at "the U," his coaches were in awe of his strength and endurance. Summers harvesting watermelons built James. "It helped shape me so much that I was all muscular when I got to Miami even though I never lifted a weight in my life. I was hardened in every way." Florida watermelon crews—known as "gators" when they were largely African American and then "sandillero" when the demographic shifted to Latinos—were known for their skill and strength. The CIW watermelon co-op was no different.

Members of the co-op proudly declared, “Yo soy sandillero” as they headed north with each season’s harvest. Harvesting watermelons is another one of those jobs, like picking tomatoes, that you might take for granted. But this is a skilled trade. Greg gives us a feel for the work:

Workers must learn the complex interplay of five or six different signs that indicate when a melon is ripe and ready for harvest—or else get fired without recourse for cutting green melons. They must learn to throw and catch twenty- to thirty-pound oblong fruits with just the right arc, often keeping pace on foot with the moving field truck. Thousands of times a day they must pitch melons to another worker up to ten feet away. . . . They must also accurately estimate the weight of melons flying by at a rate of two or three per second on a fast-moving conveyor belt or risk having a load rejected for mis-sized melons—another fire-able offense. But perhaps the most important skill watermelon workers must develop is an almost Herculean endurance. . . . sixteen hours a day under a hot summer sun, in temperatures that often climb well over 100 degrees.

Hripsimee’s strength? Greg called on that strength when he first started with the others picking watermelons. “[I] wanted to pass out in the 100-degree temperatures and endless heavy-ass work and I wouldn’t let myself because I knew she suffered far worse on her forced march across that desert. Knowing that I came from that strength—forged and tested in the most intense crucible of survival. . . . Sounds dramatic, but it’s real.”

That physicality and stubborn strength that wouldn’t let Greg give in to the heat combines with an exceptional ability to analyze and see the big picture. Impatience with those who don’t understand how the pieces fit together combines with patience and persistence to do what must be done to win the fight he and Laura have taken on.

Patience was essential as the two of them took time to learn the details of the lives and work of Immokalee’s farmworkers. On the other hand, impatience was a daily factor in their work with Florida Rural Legal Services. The lawyer and paralegals in Immokalee and other Florida offices were dedicated. They often won the cases they took on. But victories in court only served to reinforce the paralegals’ conviction that real and enduring change would not come from “helping” workers with a legalistic approach that “atomizes the process and then monetizes it.” Greg and Laura argued that the traditional approach to advocacy did not take on the agricultural labor situation as a whole and therefore could not transform the system. This is where the most powerful element the two brought to Immokalee comes in. The changing of just a few words, from “for” to “with” and from

“individual” to “community,” belied what was in fact a radical change in perspective: instead of advocating *for* individual migrant workers, FRLS and other legal and social advocacy groups needed to be working *with* the worker community as a whole, “finding a way for the [worker] community to analyze and understand its own situation so that it could bring its voice to the table with the growers.”

There’s something to good timing. In the early 1990s, what Greg and Laura recognized as they listened was that Immokalee was changing. The difference was in the people streaming into town. What was to become the Coalition of Immokalee Workers had a critical asset from the beginning: recent immigrants from those nations where there was a long history of political organizing. The Haitians were particularly important. Fleeing the violence and retribution that followed the military’s overthrow of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide (who himself had come to the presidency after a popular coup against Jean Claude Duvalier in 1986), Haitians from the second boatlift joined a Haitian community established in Immokalee in the early 1980s. These new arrivals were political, not economic, refugees, and many had been involved in political activism in Haiti, the same activism that Greg had become a part of. At the same time, there was an increasing number of immigrants from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Chiapas and Oaxaca in Mexico. Like the Haitians, they were also fleeing violence and desperate economies. Although the new immigrants had come to Immokalee to work, what Greg and Laura soon understood was that many of the new immigrants had a hidden experience and skill, distinct from those who had come before, that offered new tools for change. Guatemala, El Salvador, Chiapas, and particularly Haiti, all had extensive grassroots popular organizations that had achieved some success.

“All of these people were trying to survive in farm work, but [they] had experience from home. Deep, smart, organizing experience . . . not like anything in the United States.” Remembering their early years in Immokalee, Greg and Laura realized that the lessons Greg had learned in Haiti and the idea that had brought them both to Immokalee could resonate with these newest immigrants. There was a real possibility of “bringing together the community to ask ‘why they were poor’ and what they could do to change their lives.”

Cristal Pierre was one of the new immigrants arriving in Immokalee. Pierre had long been an “animator” (i.e., a trained organizer and educator) in Haiti. Like Greg, Pierre had been trained in the Mouvman Peyizan Papay (Peasant Movement of Papay, or MPP). The MPP had built on the popular education ideas of Paulo Freire and variants of liberation theology, joining other Haitian-born organizations including the Association of Peasant Animation, as part of the island-wide congress of community activists and animators. Reconnecting with Greg in Immokalee, Pierre understood the promise of his and Laura’s ideas.

Jean-Claude Jean, likewise trained in Haiti as an animator, also found his way to Immokalee, as did Pedro Lopez and Felipe Miguel. And so it began. Knocking on doors, through FRLS, on the work crews, quietly making connections, finding those who had the organizing and education skills but “weren’t using [them] in Immokalee because of the daily struggle to survive,” Greg and Laura began reaching out. Cristal, Jean-Claude, Pero Pilen, Pedro . . . finding each other and starting to build a community. By 1993, old friends and new connections had formed something novel and unlike any other organization seen in Immokalee: the Proyecto de Trabajadores Agrícolas del Suroeste de la Florida, or Southwest Florida Farmworker Project. It’s possible they knew where this might lead. It was no doubt an ambitious vision for the future of the community. But it is certain that the rest of Immokalee’s agricultural community had no idea where this would go.

“Don’t come back tomorrow!” Lucas Benitez stood his ground as he faced off with the furious crew leader in the tomato field. Lucas shouted back at the crew leader. “I’ll come back and if you don’t hire me, it is revenge and illegal!” Here’s what the crew leader didn’t know about this young guy, new to Immokalee: “I had read the booklet. I came back the next day and worked.” The “booklet” was “The Green Book” Greg Asbed and Laura Germino had put together in their first steps toward informing the Immokalee worker community of their legal rights. The Farmworker Project was just beginning and its “media plan” was to tack up flyers on telephone poles and around Immokalee in the workers’ housing areas. “Come see a movie!” Nobody had TV, and a movie at the church sounded better than hanging out on the steps of a trailer. When Lucas and his brother Ramiro saw a flier, they looked at each other. “Let’s go!”

Wednesday evening, the brothers found themselves in Sanders Hall, a common room at Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church. The church, one of a few small social service providers for farmworkers in Immokalee, had made its spaces available to the small farmworkers group for their movie nights. The movies were popular and had the advantage of seeming innocuous if noticed by the crew leaders and supervisors in town. That Wednesday night, as the movie ended, “a guy from El Salvador said ‘let’s discuss other issues.’” The film that evening was *El Norte*, and the connections were real between the brother and sister in the film, who had suffered crossing the border into the United States, and the immigrants and workers in the room. Lucas and Ramiro stayed, and by the end of the night the Salvadoran had invited the pair to attend the Farmworker Project’s regular Sunday evening meetings.

Meeting in Sanders Hall or under the trees on the church lawn, there were just a handful of people. Greg, Laura, Lucas and Ramiro, the worker from El Salvador,

Cristal Pierre, Felipe Miguel (known as “Pilin”), Jean-Claude Jean, Andres Lopez, and a few others from Haiti and Guatemala. The central idea Greg brought to Immokalee—an idea that resonated with familiarity to many of these workers from Haiti, Mexico, and Central America—was Consciousness + Commitment = Change. “Consciousness” meant understanding and diagnosing the situation they were in. Lucas explains, “We had to understand what we saw when we arrived in Immokalee . . . the cheap price for labor, verbal abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse.” Consciousness also required addressing the fundamental question of “why are farm workers poor?”

After a couple of the Sunday meetings, Lucas and Ramiro began animating the Wednesday movie nights and the conversations that followed. In no time the brothers were actively involved, working with the other cofounders to let new workers know about the Project, plan the movie nights, and bring the community together.

Talking with Lucas, you have to ask why; why did he and his brother get involved? There were tens of thousands of workers flooding into Immokalee each season. Some of them would join the movie nights, but most workers were keeping their heads down. Earning enough money for food and shelter was tough enough; making enough money to send home was even harder. And those who joined the Southwest Florida Farmworker Project ran a real risk of being black-listed for work or being beaten up for their impudence. So why join?

“Why?” says Lucas. “It was our history. From our mother and father, standing up for yourself. Mexican culture is matriarchal; the real decisions are from the mother. ‘Macho’ is just a figure, a pose. My grandmother is my hero. She was a widow when my dad was two or three years old. At that time, being a single mother was very hard. She was a midwife and never married again. . . . My grandmother taught my dad from ‘the school of life.’” Lessons Lucas’s dad passed onto his kids, telling stories each night about possibilities for the future and the dignity of work.

The Green Book, flyers, movies, these were all first steps in connecting the community. Of great value was the “participatory community survey” the Project held in 1993. The survey was essentially “a month-long ‘listening’ exercise . . . to learn what people in the community felt needed to be changed.” The survey, knocking on doors and quietly talking to workers as they sat exhausted outside their cramped trailers, let more people know about the new organization but established from the beginning the principle of “worker-driven change.” The workers themselves made clear the problems they were facing: low wages, violence in the fields, a lack of respect from their bosses, and wretched and expensive housing. They also identified an immediate need: affordable food. The markets in Immokalee were notorious for their exorbitant prices. Their owners, like the

landlords who could charge Naples-luxury-level prices for broken-down trailers, had a captive market. On the workers' hierarchy of needs, cars fell well behind food, rent, and money to send home. Vans brought them to Immokalee and the buses took them to the fields. Market owners could charge two to three times the retail prices found in other southwestern Florida towns. The intent from even these first years was for farmworkers to organize to improve their own lives—distinct from the charity of others—and this first step of surveying the workers had a real effect. Farmworker Project members soon pooled their resources to buy food staples, and Greg and Lucas could be found driving a rented U-Haul truck to Miami to buy rice, beans, and tortilla flour in bulk from the Latino warehouses on the western outskirts of the city. Project members sold the supplies, at first from a stand on the street as an informal co-op. Co-op participants received a dividend based on how much time they spent working in the co-op and on their initial financial investment. Even better, as the co-op expanded, prices dropped at the other markets and grocery stores in Immokalee.

Consciousness + Commitment = Change. A lesson taught and lived in Haiti, Chiapas, and Guatemala. And a lesson well-learned by Greg Asbed. Greg Asbed described what occurred in the early years of the farmworkers group as a “reverse technology transfer.” The new immigrants brought knowledge and skills of community building to the other workers in Immokalee. As Greg and Laura came to know workers through their work with FRLS, Cristal Pierre, Lucas, Ramiro, Pedro Lopez, Felipe Miguel, and others connected through work crews. The new Southwest Florida Farmworker Project began to tap into the experience new immigrants had with “sophisticated organizing skills with a culture of ‘consciousness precedes change.’”

Connecting with members of the community, the cofounders focused first on the “Consciousness” piece of the equation, or “*concientizacion*.” In the early meetings beginning in 1992 and 1993, perhaps talking late into the night in the church yard, the workers moved from talking about their own experiences in the fields to recognizing a long pattern of abuse shared by all the workers. With many of the workers having been active in, or at least familiar with, popular movements in their home country, they soon came to recognize that they were facing in Florida a “systemic denial of . . . their fundamental equality and dignity as human beings.” This recognition seemed to call for a substantial break with the traditional advocacy approach of fighting legal violations piecemeal. Still working for Florida Rural Legal Services, Greg and Laura argued that there was little hope for real change in the lives of farmworkers if advocacy organizations continued to battle a series of legal violations. Success required a change of perspective, moving to the argument that farmworkers, instead of facing occasional and specific

violations, were up against a “denial of human rights.” It was not simply a matter of violating minimum wage laws, but of denying workers their right to a living wage. Or, in a second example of violation versus denial, not an issue of violating laws on the use of pesticides, but a denial of the workers’ right to safe working conditions. In contrast to the approach of their colleagues at FRLS and other legal aid organizations, Greg and Laura decided to take a systemic approach to the working and living conditions of migrant farmworkers in Florida. It was a perspective, with its human rights framework, that resonated with the new immigrants when they had the opportunity to look up from the imperative of survival and connect their individual experiences with those of the other workers that attended the early meetings and to their lives as citizens in their home countries.

A radical change in perspective was needed, but from that recognition to actual transformation of workers’ lives was more than a leap. The early members of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers recognized that the first step was to raise the farmworkers’ awareness and understanding of their situation, to see themselves as part of a community that could stand together rather than as individuals who had to bear the burdens alone. Commitment to take action would follow. Drawing lessons from experience in Haiti, Mexico, and Guatemala, Greg, Pilin, Lucas, Laura, Pedro Lopez, Cristal Pierre, and the other cofounders identified three tools to bring the community together and develop the commitment to fight for change. The first of these, “popular education,” drew from ideas originated with Brazilian Paulo Freire in the late 1960s and 1970s. Freire’s ideas moved to Haiti, where they took root and developed throughout the Caribbean and Latin America. Popular education provides a framework for viewing the situation in which the farmworkers live and determining why the problems exist. It emphasizes understanding the problems they face both in concept and in concrete terms directly tied to their daily lives. Freire wrote about popular education as a method for providing those who have been marginalized socially and politically with an understanding of where they are on the “social and economic continuum.” In Immokalee, beginning in the early 1990s, workers discussed their daily experiences and soon recognized that others had the same experiences of stolen wages, substandard housing with exorbitant rents, and working under a real threat of violence. Workers who took part in the Farmworker Project discussions and meetings began to see themselves as no longer alone but part of a community with shared interests. Together they took the next step of analyzing where their community fit into broader society and then identifying potential solutions for the problems they faced.

Greg Asbed makes the case that popular education really is a sophisticated methodology using deliberately simple tools to facilitate communication with

a community that, like Immokalee, is made up of people who are putting most of their energy into survival and who likely have limited formal education. The tools, referred to as “codes,” include drawings and flyers, skits or “teatro,” stories, and songs, all designed to present and explain information without requiring formal education or even literacy. Importantly, popular education is done in groups. Unlike traditional education, popular education moves quickly from “telling” or lecturing to mutual learning. Essential to its effectiveness is that it is participatory, designed for workers to share their own experience and together develop insight and understanding that moves beyond recognizing their common situation to identifying actions they can take to affect their situation. Popular education is “education for action, and as such its effectiveness must ultimately be measured by the degree to which it moves the community to take action, fight for change, and win a degree of control over its collective destiny.”

Drawings and flyers were particularly effective in the early years of what became the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (although they have become less so in recent years as workers increasingly have gotten cell phones and smartphones). With a half dozen or more languages spoken, low literacy levels, and a wide range of cultural and ethnic backgrounds, communication across these divides was a challenge, and it was difficult to foster a sense of a “worker community.” Drawings cut across these divides. Cartoons showing crew leaders sitting on the backs of the workers and the growers sitting on the backs of the crew leaders connected with the situation all workers faced each day, regardless of where they came from. As more workers attended the weekly meetings, skits and songs provoked discussion. The earliest Southwest Florida Farmworker Project members focused their analysis on the situation workers faced in the fields, or what they came to regard as “inside the farm gate.” Coming together in the weekly meetings, the workers came to recognize that the community was divided by language, culture, country, and region of origin and was an ever-changing, transient population. Separation and loneliness increased the fear of individual farmworkers who trusted no one and had to fight their own individual fights against the crew leaders and growers. Standing alone, they always lost. The effectiveness of the Farmworker Project’s original approach to popular education continues to this day; it remains at the center of the weekly meetings of what is now the Coalition of Immokalee Workers. As new workers come to Immokalee and find their way to the Coalition’s offices, the skits and discussions push past the fear and the separation between workers and begins to bring them together as a community with a changed perspective on their common situation. Reflecting on the process, one worker explained, “At the beginning, you unlearn what you know about the world and start seeing it from a different perspective. You start examining the system.”

“*Todos somos lideres.*” (We are all leaders.) Leadership development, with the broadest possible scope, was the second tool adopted in the early 1990s by the CIW’s precursor Southwest Florida Farmworker Project. From the first meetings in Our Lady of Guadalupe’s church hall, the founders emphasized wide participation in determining the group’s activities and tactics. Again drawing on the lessons learned from the Caribbean and Latin American popular movements, Greg and Laura, Lucas, Ramiro, Cristal, Jean-Claude, Pedro, Pilin, and the others believed that everyone has the potential to lead in some manner, whether through organization building, leading meetings or training sessions, reaching out to community members, leading protests or other actions, in the fields, or simply by example. To this day, “*todos somos lideres*” is featured in Coalition literature, is on their website, and is painted on the front of their office. The declaration comes naturally out of the idea of workers coming together to pursue change from within, rather than outside activists leading the fight. As Lucas Benitez reflected on these early years, he wondered, “At seventeen, when would I ever have time to be ‘an activist’? It was the commitment that grew here and the consciousness that grew here. Some call me an ‘activist’ but I’m a worker looking for change. We’re not ‘activists’ because we are not from outside.”

It is also true that this early emphasis on leadership, and of always developing new leaders, turned a difficulty in organizing a migrant worker community into a strength. A decade later, a CIW member working on a watermelon crew talked about the migrant nature of the community, with its pluses and minuses. “That’s one of the main challenges of our organization. Every season our members come and go. New workers come to town. That’s the nature of the agricultural industry. But we know that without an informed and conscious group of workers and members our struggle won’t progress. We must always work to build consciousness in the whole worker population in Immokalee. We use popular education to grow new leaders every year . . . and never stop coming up with new ideas.”

Workers who attended the weekly meetings and indicated they were interested in doing more were included in strategy and planning discussions, taking on responsibilities as Lucas and Ramiro did when they first planned and led the movie nights. The Farmworker Project’s initial emphasis on “consciousness” gradually expanded to explicitly strengthening commitment and broad-based leadership, providing leadership workshops for any who were interested. Workshops emphasized sharing and building leadership skills like planning and running meetings and communication. Early workshops were run by founding members who had trained in their home countries, as well as by trainers experienced in popular education who traveled to Immokalee from Haiti and Mexico, expanding the pool of those who could train others. Those leading these sessions were referred to by the Haitian title “animators.” They inspired

others to come together to understand their situation and take responsibility for developing actions in response.

At the most practical level, a collective approach to planning and decision making plus deliberate leadership training available to all addressed the reality of a migrant workforce that arrived in Immokalee and then moved on, following the season and the crops. Some workers returned to Immokalee each October, but there was no denying that the workforce was always in a state of churn. Additionally, those who committed to bringing the community together to fight for the human rights of farmworkers were strengthened in that commitment by taking on leadership responsibilities. As they learned the techniques of popular education, learned meeting planning and facilitation skills, and strengthened their communication skills, workers themselves took on the responsibility to improve their lives. And an emphasis on consensus and an active role for all Coalition members avoided the distance that is common in organizations with a traditionally hierarchical relationship between leaders and members.

“It was around Christmas, and all these Christmas lights were everywhere, and we’re out there with this bloody shirt and there were twenty-eight patrol cars around the house and cops with camouflage on from Collier County.” Greg Asbed and Lucas Benitez describe the surreal scene. Four hundred or more farmworkers surrounded the house, just a block or so away from Our Lady of Guadalupe church in Immokalee. Between the workers and house was a line of police and between the police and the house was a cluster of Campbell family members. For men that usually ruled by fear, notorious for their abusive treatment of their crews, the Campbells’ shouts were thin and hard to hear over the energy of the gathering crowd. Even as they swore at the farmworkers, you have to imagine the men’s confusion, and even a bit of fear. What the hell was going on? It wasn’t the first time some punk field hand got what was coming to him. How could it be that there were hundreds of workers protesting in their front yard? How could it be that the Campbells had to be protected by the police?

Before we can answer the Campbells’ questions, we need to go back in time a year or more to the fall of 1995. Standing in the parking lot of what was then the Pantry Shelf, Lucas Benitez described the first signal that something had changed in Immokalee. Then, as now, the parking lot was where the workers gathered in the predawn dark, hoping to be selected by the crew leaders to join a work crew. For three years, the Southwest Florida Farmworker Project had been building a foundation, defining itself, and connecting with the worker community. Membership in the Project was growing, and in this third season, people were not only attending the weekly meetings but also taking part in the leadership workshops. Through popular education and leadership training, “consciousness” was

spreading among the migrant workers, and commitment was deepening in those who had returned to Immokalee each season.

In the fall of 1995, it was time for the third tool of the workers' group to kick in: action. For decades, farmworkers picking tomatoes had been paid a straight piece rate for their work, which in the mid-1990s was forty cents per thirty-two-pound bucket of tomatoes. The average worker, on a good day, could pick two and a half tons (5,000 pounds), or about 156 buckets of tomatoes, earning just over \$62 for the day. A particularly fast worker might pick as many as 200 buckets of tomatoes (6,400 pounds) in a day, earning \$80.

Leading up to the start of the tomato-harvesting season in 1995, many of the largest growers had shifted from this traditional piece-rate system to a combination of hourly pay and piece work. Workers were paid minimum wage for eight hours plus 10 cents for each bucket picked. The new system was known as a "day and a dime" and was intended to further reduce workers' pay, in full recognition that the full piece rate was about the same as workers had been paid in the 1970s. The two workers described above, who earned \$62 and \$80 respectively under the traditional piece rate, would earn \$49 and \$54 under the new "day and a dime" system. That November, Pacific Land Co., one of the largest growers, further cut wages. Rather than paying \$4.25 an hour plus a dime per bucket, workers already living in poverty were told by the company to make do with \$3.85. Take it or leave it.

Wages were going down, but rents and the prices in Immokalee's few stores surely weren't following. And there seemed to be no way to fight back except to seize the first opportunity to leave Immokalee or try and find other work. But—quietly, quietly—by the fall of 1995 the Southwest Florida Farmworker Project had been gaining members and a shared understanding of where they fit in within Immokalee's agricultural industry. The revelation for the migrant workers was that the community held a power that no individual could claim. And when Pacific Land announced the wage cut, the community decided to test that power. Soon, members of the group were knocking on doors and passing out flyers calling for a general strike against the growers. The morning of November 13, 1995, the crew leaders arrived at the Pantry Shelf parking lot and found a thousand or so workers waiting for them. Only this morning, the workers were not getting on the buses. The tomato workers, joined by citrus workers, refused to go to the fields until the rate was changed. By standing together in the parking lot, "the workers made it clear that the agricultural machinery would not turn without their participation."

This first-ever general strike by Immokalee's farmworkers lasted for five days. The *Fort Myers News-Press* reported that as many as three thousand workers had participated in the strike, occupying the Pantry Shelf parking lot all through the