To Pay for a Tomato
by Arianna Pickard

Arianna Pickard is a Journalism Major from Tulsa, OK. She wrote this essay in the “What Is Work?” course taught by Catherine Mintler.

“Any American who has eaten a winter tomato, either purchased at a supermarket or on top of a fast food salad has eaten a fruit picked by the hand of a slave.”

-Florida’s Middle District Attorney Douglas Molloy, loosely quoted in Barry Estabrook’s Tomatoland (75).

Why can you buy a taco from Taco Bell for 89 cents when, at other restaurants, the cost for almost the same meal is significantly higher? In order for many fast food restaurants to sell their food for such low prices, they demand that vegetable-growing companies sell them produce at an extremely low price. To meet this demand, growers lower the wages of their field-workers. In the tomato industry, this means that tomato pickers receive almost no pay and suffer inhumane living conditions so that their employers can sell produce to fast-food corporations as cheaply as possible, allowing you and me—the consumers—to buy a quick, cheap meal. Consequently, citizens in the “Land of the Free” continuously eat food produced by slaves in their own country.

Americans could take a major step toward living in a truly free country if we took advantage of our power over the food industry and chose to stop supporting the companies that perpetuate slavery.

Living in the 21st century, it might seem impossible to believe that slavery still exists in America. When you think of slaves, you might picture people dressed in rags and working in chains on an 1850s plantation. To understand how the concept of slavery relates to today’s tomato pickers, we must understand what classifies a person as a slave. Kevin Bales and Ron Soodalter, experts on modern-day slavery, have devised three criteria for recognizing slavery: they say that a type of work qualifies as slavery if the employer has complete control of the employee, if the employee performs labor for little or no pay, and if the employer exploits its employees in order to make a profit (Bales and Soodalter 13). To understand how tomato pickers meet these criteria, consider the experience of Antonio Martinez, a former modern-day slave.

Antonio Martinez left his father and siblings in Mexico after meeting with a contractor who promised Martinez that he could earn $1700 doing construction work in California. But after the contractor smuggled him across the border, Martinez found himself on his way to Immokalee, Florida to work in the tomato fields at the pay rate of $150 a day (Bales and Soodalter 49). Upon arrival in Florida, the man driving Martinez and other Hispanic workers stopped to negotiate prices with the man in charge of the tomato plantation; it was at this time that Martinez realized he was being sold like an animal. Once Martinez...
was on the tomato plantation, the shack where he and other workers slept at night was only unlocked when it was time to go to work in the mornings. The overseers never left the workers alone, and they threatened them with violence or death if they attempted to escape (Bales and Soodalter 50). After their employer deducted various “fees,” such as rent and the cost of the bus ride there, Martinez and his coworkers’ salaries amounted to almost nothing. Martinez was held under the complete control of his employer, performed hard labor for almost no pay, and was exploited by his employer (Bales and Soodalter 50). Thus, his experience as a tomato-picker in Immokalee meets Bales and Soodalter’s three criteria. It may be the 21st century, but America has not yet rid itself from slavery.

Slavery in vegetable fields stretches across America—since 1997, more than 1000 people have been found working under slavery conditions on American farms (Barclay). But slavery is especially prominent in the tomato fields of Immokalee. Florida tomato farms produce one-third of the tomatoes bought and sold in the United States, most of which grow on Immokalee farms (Estabrook 19). Even in the harshest weather, Immokalee produces and ships tomatoes to grocery stores and fast food chains around the nation (Bales and Soodalter 45). Douglas Molloy, the District Attorney for Florida’s Middle District, has called the conditions of tomato pickers in Immokalee “ground zero for modern-day slavery” (qtd. in Estabrook 75). Similarly, reporter Eliza Barclay writes, “Tomato pickers make up some of the worst treated and lowest paid farm workers in the U.S.” (Barclay 2). The farms in Immokalee corner the tomato market by cheating their employees out of fair wages, consistent working hours, and proper living conditions.

Immokalee tomato farms claim to pay all of their employees at least minimum wage (Bales and Soodalter 45). However, they pay their tomato pickers according to how many buckets of tomatoes they fill. The pickers earn about $25 per ton of tomatoes they pick, with a ton consisting of about 63 buckets full of tomatoes. For these workers to make the standard $7.25 an hour that the law requires the farms to pay their employees, they must fill about two hundred buckets in one day, which will probably take them about twelve or thirteen hours (Bales and Soodalter 46). Since not every tomato-picker can work bent over outside in the intense heat of Southern Florida for twelve or thirteen hours, they often do not end up earning a full minimum wage.

Immokalee tomato farms also cut costs through the housing they provide for tomato pickers. The only available housing for tomato pickers is in broken-down trailers, tiny huts, and dumpy little apartments (Bales and Soodalter 45). About fifteen trailers crowd onto a single lot, and each trailer houses up to twelve men, each of whom pay a rent of $50 a week to their employer. The workers sleep on mattresses that fit in the trailer by laying side-to-side on the floor. The growing companies can therefore make $600 dollars a week off of one little beaten-down trailer.

As consumers, we might assume that since writers like Estabrook, Bales, and Soodalter have exposed the injustice that workers face in Immokalee, the food companies who rely on Immokalee tomatoes are already taking the necessary actions to change their system. Surely, now that
corporations know what their demands for cheap produce lead to, they will do what they can to stop promoting slavery. However, certain corporations remain hesitant to sign onto efforts to improve working conditions of Immokalee tomato pickers. Four supermarket chains, including Trader Joe’s, are resisting a movement for fair food led by a grass-roots organization called the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW). On May 11, 2011, Trader Joe’s published a letter to its customers explaining why it refuses to sign the CIW’s “Fair Food” agreement. In the letter, the company claims that the agreement the CIW asked it to sign is “overreaching, ambiguous and improper” (“A Note to Our Customers…”). While they claim to “have great concern for the rights of all who work to provide products sold in our stores,” and that they “have developed a solution to this matter that provides workers with an ‘extra penny per pound,’” Trader Joe’s still refuses to adhere to all of the CIW’s requirements (“A Note to Our Customers…”). Instead, it accused the CIW of “spreading misleading and not factual information” about its company. Trader Joe’s has made claims that “it will only buy from Florida tomato growers abiding by the Fair Food Code of conduct” and “that it is already paying a penny per pound ‘Fair Food Premium’ to improve tomato pickers wages” (“A Note to Our Customers…”). However, as of May 2011, the CIW has seen no proof of these claims (“Point-by-Point Response…”). The CIW concludes that “until Trader Joe’s agrees to work with the CIW—as nine leading food corporations have already done—those claims are just words” (“Point-by-Point Response…”).

While one would hope that the claims Trader Joe’s has made are true, one must agree with the CIW that the company could possibly be making these claims just to soften their public image and could throw them away once the CIW’s protest ends (“Point-by-Point Response…”). The fact that Trader Joe’s and three other companies are hesitating to comply with activists’ efforts to offer fair wages to these workers, despite the published proof of worker exploitation in Florida, suggests that these companies are more concerned with the way the public perceives them than they are about truly changing the labor practices of their tomato suppliers. While these companies continue to resist, workers continue to be exploited and enslaved in Florida fields.

Immokalee workers currently do what they can to better their situation, but their efforts can only go so far. The CIW has succeeded in getting two famously brutal Immokalee employers, César and Geovanni Navarette, sentenced to twelve years in prison (“About CIW”). They have also persuaded several fast food companies to raise the cost of tomatoes so tomato pickers can receive higher pay (“About CIW”). And, through determined investigation, discovery, and prosecution, the CIW has helped to liberate over 1000 enslaved Immokalee workers (“About CIW”). However, the CIW cannot fully succeed if they fight alone, and that’s where we as consumers must come in. The CIW has found that the most effective way to increase the wages of Immokalee workers is to persuade the corporations that buy produce from the growers to raise their prices, and this can only be done with consumer participation. As Antonio Martinez, the former slave whose experiences I described above, points out, “there is more and
more consumer participation in the struggle, and it makes the campaign that much stronger” (qtd. in Bales and Soodalter 50). Since there are still corporations ignoring the presence of slavery in the fields that grow their produce, the best way to get them to change their ways is for consumers to pressure them to do it.

Because we buy their products, consumers like you and me hold the power over whether food chains will continue to cause people to be put into slavery. A four-year boycott of Taco Bell led by student, religious, labor, and community organizations finally convinced the chain to raise the price they were willing to pay for Immokalee tomatoes (“About CIW”). The case of Taco Bell proves the impact consumer participation can have if we choose to get involved. Bales and Soodalter emphasize the urgency of consumer participation when they write, “It is within our grasp to end slavery in America once and for all, but each of us has to reach for it; if we wait for it to be handed to us, people will live and die in slavery for many years to come” (253). If we choose to take advantage of the power we have and stop buying from food companies until they raise their prices and promote better fair working conditions, the companies will have no choice but to comply with our demands. As consumers, we essentially hold the key to unlock the chains restricting these workers.

When a company uses slavery to obtain ingredients sold in their products, you support that slavery every time you buy from that company. Farmers’ markets, restaurants, and grocery stores that obtain produce fairly are not difficult to find, if you are looking them. If you chose to support companies that purchase only fairly obtained products, you could finally put an end to this exploitation that is taking place in your own country. You have this power now because your eyes have been opened, and now that you are aware, you must act. How many restaurants and supermarkets that you patronize currently help to throw innocent people into slavery? How much are you willing to pay for your tomatoes?

Works Cited


