

2007 Anti-Slavery Award goes to the Coalition of Immokalee Workers

November 2007-- Anti-Slavery International is delighted to announce that the winner of the 2007 Anti-Slavery Award is the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) for their exceptional contribution towards tackling modern-day slavery in the United States agricultural industry.

The CIW is a worker-led community organisation based in Florida, which works with farm workers trafficked into forced labour, the majority of whom are from Mexico and Central America. They uncover and investigate cases of slavery whilst raising awareness of forced labour practises amongst the farm worker community. Their determined efforts have resulted in the prosecution of six slavery cases in the past decade and the liberation of over a thousand workers held in debt bondage. The CIW also seeks to prevent forced labour within the industry and has successfully campaigned for corporate buyers to take responsibility for the conditions in their supply chain, leading to historic agreements with the largest fast-food corporations in the world. The awards ceremony will be held November 21, 2007 in London.

The Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) was founded in 1993 by a group of farm workers to fight slavery and exploitation in US agriculture. The organisation is based in Immokalee, Florida, a region which is a key producer of crops such as oranges and tomatoes. Formed by the largely Mexican, Guatemalan and Haitian migrant worker community, the CIW began organising in response to the many labour rights violations that plague Florida's fields, including sub-poverty wages, intimidation and beatings, and in most severe cases, forced labour.

What began as weekly meetings of a few dozen members has now grown into a nationwide movement, with a membership of over 4,000 farm workers, and tens of thousands of student, labour, faith-based and consumer allies. With 10 core staff democratically elected from the membership, CIW takes pride in its non-hierarchical structure, hence their motto 'we are all leaders.' Their first action in 1995 culminated in a general strike of over 3,000 farm workers in Immokalee to address a decrease in wages.

The CIW believes that the most effective tool for combating modern-day slavery is the worker's active engagement in the struggle for their human rights. The CIW's anti-slavery work operates on several levels: uncovering, investigating, and assisting in the prosecution of forced labour operations, community-based educational programmes and long-term preventative strategies.

The organisation works closely with Federal authorities in order to prosecute slavery cases. Their trusted status within the migrant farm worker community enables them to receive information about possible slavery operations. Once a situation of forced labour is suspected CIW investigates further, and at times goes undercover to work with those enslaved to collect vital evidence. This information is then used to build a case, which can take many years. Throughout this time CIW maintains contact with exploited workers and witnesses, advocating on their behalf and helping them negotiate the legal process.

The Coalition's outreach work focuses on educating and empowering migrant workers, employing methods such as leafleting around labour camps and training workers on how to identify forced labour indicators. Their radio station La Tuya (Your Radio) which now has over 10,000 listeners, is a fundamental part of their outreach work. The radio educates workers about their rights and forced labour, broadcasts updates on CIW's actions and progress, and contains special programming in Mayan and other indigenous languages.

In addition to addressing already-existing slavery operations, the CIW focuses on how to prevent slavery from taking root in the agricultural industry by tackling the underlying causes. The Coalition recognises that until overall labour standards are improved and the unequal power balance between large agricultural employers and workers is addressed, this form of slavery will continue to exist. As CIW's Anti-Slavery Co-ordinator Laura Germino states; "If you talk about slavery in a vacuum then you are doing a disservice, as you're not going to eliminate it. If you can end sweatshop conditions, you can end slavery."

In 2001, CIW launched the Campaign for Fair Food targeting the major fast-food corporations responsible for buying vast amounts of produce, and who therefore have tremendous buying power to demand low prices. This puts pressure on suppliers to reduce costs, lowering wages and encouraging poor working conditions. CIW pressurises these corporations to take responsibility for labour abuses in their supply chains through launching national boycotts and campaigns, propelled by creative protests including cross-country tours, hunger strikes, and long-distance marches. Their active campaigning over the past six years not only offers an impressive model of community mobilisation but also gives former slaves and other workers the opportunity to participate in the wider struggle to improve industry standards and take back control of their lives.

Challenges and achievements

CIW members often confront hostility, threats and intimidation in their attempts to help workers in forced labour. Due to workers' isolation, communicating with them can be very difficult. CIW relies on their trust within the community, which has enabled them to help bring six successful prosecutions to the Department of Justice in the past decade, and secure the release of over 1,000 agricultural workers held in forced labour. In one of the CIW's earliest investigations, violent employers were prosecuted on slavery charges under laws passed just after the Civil War. This was one of the seminal cases leading to the passage of a new law against modern-day slavery, the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000.

The Coalition directly challenges the climate of fear by enabling workers to speak out and testify against their abusers, if they so choose. However, while the new trafficking law provides support services and temporary US residency to those who testify, some workers decline to talk with authorities because of fear of retaliation against their families by traffickers, therefore hindering some investigations.

In 2001, CIW co-founded the Freedom Network USA to Empower Victims of Slavery and Trafficking, a national network of NGOs working to end slavery in the US and ensure that victims' human rights are respected under the new law. The Coalition is also a regional co-ordinator of the Freedom Network Training Institute, providing training on how to identify and assist people in forced labour. It has now trained over 3,000 law enforcement and social services personnel and in one case this led directly to the rescue of six people held in forced labour.

The CIW's Campaign for Fair Food provides a successful example of a preventative approach to forced labour. In 2001, the workers began organising a national consumer boycott of Taco Bell which lasted for four years and resulted in a monumental agreement with Taco Bell's parent company Yum! Brands, the world's largest restaurant company. The agreement established an enforceable zero-tolerance policy on slavery, greater transparency and improved working conditions in supply chains, and the right for farm workers to be involved in implementing fair labour practices. Yum! Brands also agreed to address farm workers' sub-poverty wages, paying money back down its supply chain directly to the workers picking its tomatoes.

Riding on their wave of success, CIW next targeted McDonalds. In April 2007, they reached an agreement with the world's largest restaurant chain that expanded on the agreement with Yum! Brands, with McDonald's agreeing to work with the CIW on the development of an industry-wide Supplier Code of Conduct and an independent monitoring system to enforce it.

CIW has now turned its campaigning efforts towards Burger King. The campaign's progress to date signals a shift in the attitudes of consumers, who have demonstrated willingness to take action to eliminate slavery behind the food they eat. This has in turn made corporations, concerned about the image of their brands, more accountable to their consumers. However, while some business executives have joined the CIW's efforts, there continues to be resistance to the much needed reforms to the industry, particularly in Florida.

CIW hopes that winning the Award will help raise awareness of the persistence of slavery in the US, providing further momentum for their Campaign For Fair Food amongst consumers in Europe and bringing attention to the plight of farm workers in the US.

For more information on Anti-Slavery International, the CIW, and forced labour in the U.S. agricultural industry, visit www.antislavery.org or www.ciw-online.org.