

To The Young Activists of Tomorrow,

My name is Gerardo Reyes Chavez, and I am a member of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW), a farmworker organization based in Florida. On behalf of all the workers in Immokalee, I send this message to young people everywhere who are organizing tirelessly for the construction of a more just and compassionate world. This letter is also for those who, until now, have not been exposed to the raging current of past and present struggles. This letter is for those who are not aware of the countless others who gave everything they had—including their lives—to preserve a simple hope, a hope that we are determined to keep alive today through our actions. It is in this spirit that I share some of our story.

The Coalition of Immokalee Workers is a community organization comprised of workers mainly from Mexico, Guatemala, and Haiti who are now laboring in the agricultural fields of Florida. Many of the workers are young men—ranging in age from fifteen to twenty-five—who have left their families behind, hoping to someday be able to return home. I was twenty-two when I came to the United States from Mexico, and it didn't take long to find my way to Immokalee, a place well known for requiring a large supply of workers.

The vicious poverty in our countries often leaves us with no option but to abandon our formal education and seek out a better future for ourselves and for our families. In the aftermath of NAFTA, for example, Mexico was transformed from one of the largest exporters of corn in the hemisphere into one of the largest exporters of cheap labor. Thousands upon thousands of small farmers, unable to compete with cheap grain dumped on our markets by U.S. corporations, were forced off their land and thrown into a desperate search for income.

That desperate search for work brings many of us to the United States. We arrive in this country believing that if people work hard here, they can eventually become whatever they want to be. We arrive in this country believing in a lie. Many of us end up working in

the fields. We pick the plump tomatoes that are sold in U.S. supermarkets and fast food restaurants. They may end up in your hamburgers at McDonald's or your chalupas at Taco Bell. Yet those of us who bring these vegetables to this country's tables are invisible to most people.

Our dreams of the United States are quickly shattered when we find ourselves working ten to fourteen hours a day, earning barely enough to feed ourselves and pay rent. Our day begins before sunrise and ends after sundown. In order to survive, we are often forced to live with strangers in overcrowded, run-down trailers without air-conditioning in the summer or heating in the winter. Sometimes our bosses refuse to pay us. Even after working with the same company for years, we still lie down each night not knowing if we'll be able to find work the next day. We work in isolated settings without basic protections that many take for granted, such as overtime pay, health benefits, or the right to organize a union. In order to make \$50 in a day, a worker must quickly pick and haul two tons of tomatoes. Pesticides stain our hands; sweat stains our clothes. We go to bed, exhausted, only to repeat it all the next day. At the end of a year, we're lucky if we make \$10,000.

Today, we are fighting for dignity as human beings and we are fighting to end more than twenty-five years of sub-poverty wages. In the most extreme situations, we are confronting the hideous reality of slavery in the twenty-first century: workers forced to labor against their will under death threats and, all too often, the actual use of violence. In the past five years, the CIW has helped liberate over one thousand captive workers. For years, we focused our efforts on opening dialogue with the growers, but these efforts were met with silence. So we asked ourselves, "Who profits from our sweat and blood?" We began to realize that large corporations—the multinational companies that demand cheap produce from the growers—are the ones benefiting the most from our misery.

Taco Bell and its parent company, Yum! Brands (which also owns Pizza Hut, KFC, Long John Silvers, and A&W Restaurants, making it the

largest restaurant corporation in the world), are one of the major purchasers of tomatoes from all over the East Coast, including Florida. The extreme situations in which we live are directly connected to Taco Bell's profits. They benefit from our poverty when they use their enormous market power to demand cheap tomatoes without also demanding fair treatment for farmworkers. In April 2001, after several failed attempts at dialogue with Taco Bell about farm labor conditions in their supply chain, we declared a national boycott against the fast food giant.

After four years of intense grassroots organizing, we finally won in March 2005, when Taco Bell agreed to meet all of our demands for improving wages and working conditions for Florida tomato pickers. This historic victory—where farmworkers and their allies prevailed over a powerful multinational corporation—would have been difficult to imagine just four years ago. As Tom Morello, former guitarist for Rage Against the Machine, explained in a public statement, “The Immokalee farmworkers struck a blow for dignity and human rights in the workplace and received the long overdue raise they have been fighting for. This is a major victory for the workers and demonstrates that by standing up and standing together, we can overturn any injustice. By standing up and standing together, we can change the world.”

Through our organizing, one of the most important lessons we've learned is the necessity of building strong alliances. For many years, we, the workers of Immokalee, were invisible to this country—lost in the darkness that agribusiness has helped to create. Now we know that we are not alone and will never be alone again. Today, thousands of students and young people from all over the country know of our struggle, and they have come to understand that this is their struggle as well. As the multinational fast food corporation oppresses farmworkers with the tyranny of extreme poverty, they oppress the youth of this country with their marketing based on the assumption that youth are hedonistic and apathetic. But we know differently. Young people across the country are taking the initiative to fight shoulder to

shoulder with us for a world in which all of us may be heard—a world in which if one of us shouts for justice, there will always be thousands of voices echoing that shout. We say there is a seed called “consciousness” that is rooted and grows within the human soul. We struggle so that this seed might germinate and reproduce. Every time someone protests against injustice after learning of the situation in which we live, we know that more seeds are being sown.

In the case of farmworkers, leaving school to start working in the fields did not mean an end to our education. On the contrary, when you take survival courses that are given by the University of Life, you learn that the outcome of every education should serve others. Nobody can consider their education complete—regardless of what theories and philosophies they have learned—if they forget about everyone else. We, the members of the CIW, are proud to know there are students who are committed to using their consciousness to confront the injustices of the world. We know this requires commitment and sacrifice in a world where being “normal” means dressing in sweatshop clothing, accepting advertising without question, and remaining silent and complicit in a society that is drowning in commercialism.

The future is the result of what we do today. The future comes after every breath we breathe and every minute we live; it comes after every action we take in pursuit of our dreams. For us in Immokalee, each day is a day of struggle, but it is also a day of celebration because new minds are seeing the horizon with an awakened awareness. It is our hope that today’s farmworker movement will serve as one of many points on the horizon that inspires young people to believe in the possibility of a better world—a world where the struggles of workers are tied to the struggles for dignity for every human being, a world where seeds of justice germinate freely, a world where we all have space to realize our dreams.

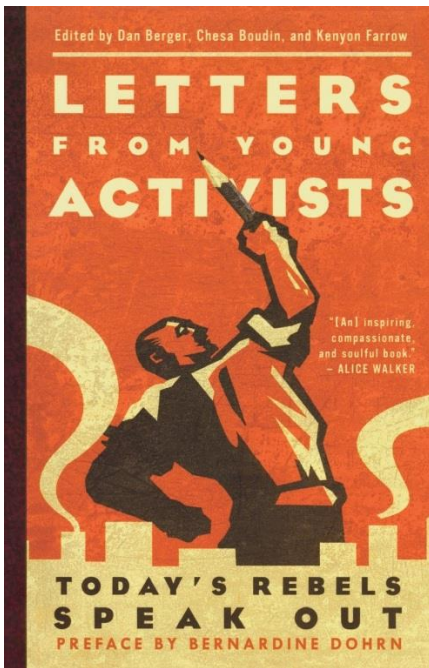
In the years since we began our boycott of Taco Bell, we have learned many valuable lessons, lessons that are available to the young activists of tomorrow. They do not represent the only way of achieving

social change; they are one path out of many possible paths. Quite literally, this is one chapter in a book. It's up to tomorrow's activists to study and write the next chapters.

For the consciousness of all,
Gerardo Reyes Chávez

Gerardo Reyes Chávez

Member of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers



<http://ciw-online.org/blog/tag/gerardo-reyes-chavez>



Gerardo Reyes Chávez has worked in the fields since age 11, first as a peasant farmer in Zacatecas, Mexico, and then in the fields of Florida picking oranges, tomatoes, and watermelons. He joined the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, a Florida-based human rights organization, shortly after his arrival in the United States in 2000, when his fellow farm worker roommates, who had previously escaped a violent slavery operation hidden in the swamp south of Immokalee, Florida, invited him to come to the CIW's Wednesday evening community meetings.

Since then, Reyes has been a key leader of the CIW, focusing his work on the community level, mobilizing the Immokalee community around national actions for the Campaign for Fair Food. An ardent activist, Reyes raises awareness in support of the campaign through presentations, workshops, and speeches. He was the featured presenter on corporate social responsibility at the TEDx Fruitvale in 2011, a panelist on the modern food industry at the Hunt Institute for Engineering and Humanity, a guest lecturer on food justice for the McDonough School of Business at Georgetown University, and was a panelist at Google's TriBeCa Film Festival workshop on labor trafficking.

Reyes has helped investigate several modern-day slavery operations, including going undercover to work on tomato farms and interviewing workers who have escaped from brutal operations. Today, as a key member of the CIW's negotiating team in talks with retail food and tomato industry leaders, he has been instrumental in forging many of the CIW's Fair Food agreements. He also helps to run Radio Conciencia, the low-power community radio station through which the CIW creates a space to share the diversity of cultures, languages, and experiences that make up Immokalee.

TED Talk from 2011 - <https://youtu.be/N6fly-p3hu0>

Get the book: <https://www.hachettebookgroup.com/titles/dan-berger/letters-from-young-activists/9781560257479>