

Publisher

Pason Gaddis
pgaddis@florida-weekly.com

Executive Editor

Jeffrey Cull
jcull@florida-weekly.com

Creative Director

Jim Dickerson
jdickerson@florida-weekly.com

Reporters & Columnists

Roger Williams
Mark Welker
Ella Naylor
Karen Feldman
Betsy Clayton

Contributing Writers

Carl-John X. Veraja
Phyllis Ershowsky
Michelle Start

Photographers

Amanda Hartman
ahartman@florida-weekly.com
Carol Orr Hartman

Proofreader

Joanne Anderson

Production

Troy Clowdus
Amanda Hartman

Circulation Manager

Penny Kennedy
pkennedy@florida-weekly.com

Circulation

Allen Brice
Scott Clowdus
David Anderson
John Noe
Paul Neumann

Account Executives

Shelley Lund
slund@florida-weekly.com

Marilyn DiCharia
marilyn@florida-weekly.com

Jodi Fullerton
jfullerton@florida-weekly.com

Mary Beth Durso
mbdurso@florida-weekly.com

Ann Brust
abrust@florida-weekly.com

Accounting Manager

Kelli Carico

Marketing Consultant

Matt Hanson

Street Address:
Fort Myers Florida Weekly
4300 Ford Street, Unit 106
Fort Myers, Florida 33916
Phone 239.333.2135
Fax: 239.333.2140

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OPINION

Farmworkers strike a blow for America

Way to go Immokalee farmworkers. The grassroots Coalition of Immokalee Workers won another major victory this month. This time over a corporate giant bent on crushing them. McDonalds USA finally agreed — after an unfavorable ruling from the Security and Exchange Commission — to help tomato pickers get an additional 1-penny per pound of picked fruit.

Big, bad McDonalds, armed with its high-priced lawyers, tried to exclude a shareholder resolution submitted by friends of the farmworkers from its 2007 proxy statement. The resolution, called "Human Rights Standards," urged directors to treat workers, including those in the supply chain, fairly.

The SEC said 'not so fast' to McDonalds attempt to have the resolution scrubbed. Days later McDonalds was ready to sing Kum ba yah.

It's funny how fast corporate America becomes a good citizen when federal regulators get involved.

It happened here in Fort Myers in

the 1990s. Lee County commissioners initially denied a farmworker village in Bonita Springs after residents and a major developer complained only to reverse themselves when the Justice Department paid them a call.

In the McDonald's case, its tomato suppliers — mostly from Southwest Florida — paid workers about 40 cents for a 32-pound bucket of tomatoes. With the new agreement, they will about get 72 cents.

The Immokalee workers waged a two-year campaign to get McDonalds — the nation's largest restaurant chain — to pay more for tomatoes and improve working conditions.

And they did it without heavy-handed lawyers (although there are two pretty talented lawyers on the Coalition's staff), much money or the courts.

Courage and commitment is all Lucas Benitez and the rest Immokalee workers needed, because they're right. Farmworkers deserve better.

So, look out Burger King, you're next. ■



COURTESY PHOTO

Send letters to the editor to news@florida-weekly.com, or mail them to 4300 Ford Street, Suite 106, Fort Myers, Fl. 33916 or call 333-2135

The Inconsistent Señor Newt

BY ROGER E. HERNANDEZ

Newt Gingrich has some splainin' to do after a recent speech in which he seemed to say Spanish was "the language of living in a ghetto."

Can any mentally competent adult with a fifth-grade education truly believe such an idiocy? The language of Cervantes, Borges and 10 winners of the Nobel Prize in Literature? A 1,000-year-old Iberian offshoot of Latin that grew to become the third or fourth most widely spoken language in the world?

You'd think Gingrich, with a doctorate in history, might have read a book or two that mentioned some of this.

Here he is, verbatim:

"We should replace bilingual education with immersion in English so people learn the common language of the country and they learn the language of prosperity, not the language of living in a ghetto."

Now, let's be fair. Parse those words, and you cannot say with 100 percent certainty that Gingrich called Spanish a ghetto language. It is possible he meant to

say that not knowing English limits socioeconomic mobility.

That was his claim when Fox's token liberal Alan Colmes asked him what he meant by "language of living in the ghetto." Gingrich answered: "What I meant is very clear, Alan. I'll let you pick the right word for me. We should not have a program which traps people into not being able to speak English."

It is foolish to conclude that Gingrich, once one of the most powerful men in American politics when he served as speaker of the House, really believes Spanish is some sort of pidgin spoken by the guys who mow the lawn.

But it is just as foolish to not realize he and other Republicans are stoking the fire of the biggest nonissue in American politics today: that Hispanic immigrants, unlike immigrants in the good ol' days, refuse to learn English.

An essay under Gingrich's byline on his Web site, www.newt.org, makes the point explicitly. "One of the most frequent complaints I hear when I'm out traveling and speaking to groups is the lack of importance given to English as the language of

success in the United States," it says.

Makes you throw your hands up in exasperation. No one challenges the assertion that English is the language of success in the U.S. — every single immigrant I've ever met in my entire life agrees it is important to learn English. What's a canard is the belief that hordes of immigrants don't agree with that, and therefore do not learn.

The fact is that today's immigrants do continue to learn. The Pew Foundation found in 2004 that 93 percent of second-generation Hispanics were bilingual or English dominant, and that by the third generation it was 100 percent.

As Gingrich himself puts it on his Web site, "Estados Unidos se acerca rápidamente a un momento decisivo en el tema de inmigración."

Yep. The same Newt Gingrich who opposes bilingual education has a bilingual Web site.

Well, don't expect consistency from a guy who cheated on his wife while working to impeach some other guy for cheating on his. ■

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