

BURGER KING

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McDonald's, buy their produce from vendors not directly from the growers.

Grover was asked if he felt that Burger King could not affect how much farm workers are paid.

"Absolutely. That's a wrong statement," Grover said. "We absolutely, through our vendor code of conduct, are pushing the growers to make sure that every worker is paid in accordance with the law. That's our role and function; that's our duty as a large global purchaser."

Grover also said that growers threatened to not sell tomatoes to Burger King should they ask for any contract.

"We're such a small tomato buyer in that

region we can't make them cooperate more than anyone else," Grover said. "They've sent us a letter saying they will not cooperate and they will not sell us tomatoes if we demand cooperation."

Jordan Buckley of Interfaith Action, a group allied with the CIW, spoke about the CIW's goals and the reasons behind them.

"We ask that there is a contract with the growers," Buckley said. "And for a three-party dialogue between the grower's, the fast food company, in this case Burger King and the workers themselves, the tomato pickers."

Buckley also said there was a call for a contract that would stipulate an end to abuses the farm workers face.

Responding to the idea of a contract, Grover said there was none but that Burger King does hold the growers to standards.

"We have no contracts with the growers

in Immokalee," Grover said. "We actually buy our tomatoes from re-packers...the tomatoes come from all over. However, in the late months, November to March, a lot of the tomatoes come from Immokalee."

Buckley said that so far Burger King has met the CIW's requests with untruths and "mischaracterizations."

"Burger King has claimed it did not understand what was proposed and how it would work," Buckley said. "When, in fact, almost a year ago to this day there was a conference call in which all this was outlined. Burger King knows more than they are letting out to the press."

Among the responses that Burger King has produced through Steve Grover was a claim that the CIW asked for a check to be made out directly them. Buckley said this has no bearing in fact.

"At no time was a check mentioned in any of our talks with Burger King," Buckley said.

In an interview on Oct. 5, Grover said no member of the CIW asked for a check.

However, when he was asked to recall that he had mentioned payments in his letter to the Palm Beach Post and in a statement to the Naples Daily News, Grover amended his statement.

"What the CIW has wanted is a large annual payment, or check, to cover the payment to the workers," Grover said. "To be passed along to the workers, all right? They've tried to twist the words around so that it sounds like a clause."

When asked to specify who in the CIW made this request Grover said, "You have to understand the tomato pickers, tomato harvesters in Immokalee come here in November. They harvest the tomatoes for three months. What the CIW has said is they want us to pay an additional penny a pound to every harvester who harvests a Burger King tomato."

Grover was asked to clarify if there was even a request for money to be paid to the CIW.

"Not to the CIW itself, no," Grover said. "They are very vague on how the money would be passed, how it would go or anything. What they want is whether it's a third party or who it would go through, where it would go, those details have never been offered. What they want is for us to pass money to the workers."

Grover also said that he welcomes tomato pickers to seek careers at Burger King "if they want to move on."

Buckley also said that Grover has tried to misrepresent the amount of money tomato pickers make.

"Actually, in a letter to the Palm Beach Post which you can find on the CIW website, Grover suggested that farm workers are paid \$12.46 an hour, which is also outrageous," Buckley said.

When asked if he felt that tomato pickers should be paid fairly Grover said, "Whatever the minimum wage is, \$6.67 an hour, they should be making that. If they are being paid less than that, that grower would be eliminated from the Burger King system."

Buckley said that the agreements with Taco Bell and MacDonald's have been effective and that Burger King wields great influence over growers.

A former tomato picker and co-founder of the CIW, Lucas Benidez, spoke about the conditions farm workers in Immokalee work in. He worked in Immokalee from 1992 to 2000 and still works several months a year in the fields.

"A normal day ranges from 10 to 12 hours," Benidez said. "They pay you by how much you are able to do not by the hour. For every bucket you receive 40 to 45 cents. I did not receive overtime pay or any type of benefits others might enjoy."

When asked how sick children are cared for, Benidez said, "First, you pray. Then you wait until the condition becomes incredibly grave before they are taken to the hospital."

Asked if they are then in debt to the hospital, he said, "Of course." ■

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