

COMMENTARY

Open letter to readers from Burger King's CEO

(as imagined by a double-whopping columnist)

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Recently, media muckrakers and pro-labor bigots have blamed Burger King for a cruel and callous disregard of migrants who pick tomatoes in Florida.

Nothing could be further from the truth. This time of year, 80 percent of the millions of pounds of cheap tomatoes provided to fast food chains in the United States and Canada come from Florida, where about 10,000 migrant workers find lucrative work harvesting them.

We at Burger King, who provide cheap fresh food in massive quantities to hungry Americans, appreciate those tomatoes. And we appreciate the pickers who help supply 11,200 Burger King restaurants in the United States and abroad.

What many fail to realize because of "po'-boy" bigotry in the press is that these workers are not ours. We don't employ them, and we shouldn't have to pay them. They can pick tomatoes, if they choose. They cannot dictate labor practices.

For that reason Burger King refuses to pay a penny-per-pound surcharge to growers, to help pay the salaries of pickers. McDonald's and Taco Bell have caved into such labor demands, but we won't. (The Florida Tomato Growers Exchange is not in favor of this deal, either. They call it "un-American.")

In truth, the po'-boys aren't poor, in spite of what the press tells you. Search your own conscience, as I have searched mine, and ask yourself: Why else would they flock to those

field jobs to work 10 or 12 hours a day bent over?

The answer is, only because they like to.

Nowadays, migrant farm workers can earn about 45 cents for every 32-pound bucket of tomatoes they pick, which is excellent money in south Florida — between \$11 and \$12 an hour. And that's what this country is still all about: working hard, just as I did to become CEO of Burger King.

Their generous hourly wage amounts to about \$12,000 to \$14,000 per year. Arguments that it isn't enough are specious. Arguments that the workers don't receive health insurance or any other benefits are equally absurd.

Of course they don't. After all, they're used to no insurance and simple living, already, so it isn't difficult for them to get by. And if they want more money, they can work at Burger King, and eat Whoppers.

Here at Burger King we believe in America, and we believe that in America each person gets what he deserves, and deserves what he earns.

Economically, we're a pillar of the American economy. Our 11,200 restaurants provide a huge number of jobs and livelihoods directly — probably more than 100,000 — and several million more indirectly: shippers, drivers, mechanics, box producers, real estate professionals and countless others, not to mention tomato pickers.

But that's not all. By providing tonnages of low-cost food containing hugely excessive fat and calorie contents at minimum nutritional levels, we help support the vast medical system in the United States — doctors, nurses, aids, ambulance drivers and the like.

We keep these professionals in well-paying jobs helping Americans whose overeating at

Burger King leads to heart attacks, strokes, hypertension and high cholesterol, to name a few. Those conditions are economically valuable to the U.S. economy; they can be treated for years with expensive medications produced at great profit by pharmaceutical companies, who rely heavily on our continued efforts.

Somebody has to train these medical workers, too, and that requires an industry of medical educators, which has sprung up at institutions like your very own Florida Gulf Coast University and Edison College, themselves economic pillars in Southwest Florida. And all this occurs only because of the responsible behavior of Burger King.

For myriad reasons, therefore, our executives are remunerated justly for their American (dare I say patriotic?) effort.

The three private equity firms controlling significant portions of Burger King stock are Bain Capital, the Texas Pacific Group and Goldman Sachs Capital Partners, whose Chief Executive, Lloyd C. Blankfein, is a role model to me.

Last year, Lloyd received the single biggest annual bonus in Wall Street history, \$53.4 million, and this year he'll take in even more. But that isn't all. The 2006 bonuses of the top 12 leaders at Goldman Sachs, alone, broke the \$200 million mark, and all of them deserved it.

I say that because the 10,000 tomato pickers in Florida made almost \$100 million together last year, which is more money than they'd ever seen in their lives. I think they deserve it, too.

In my own case, I deserve a lot more than I get. My profits have been very modest, but it's not in my nature to complain, like those po'-boy bigots at the Coalition of Immokalee Workers. My total compensation package for 2007 has

amounted to only about \$4.15 million, including \$2.35 million in total annual cash. Which was reported, tastelessly, in Business Week.

And I deserved much, much more. Under my leadership, Burger King's net income rose 23 percent, to \$49 million in the fiscal quarter ending Sept. 30, and our total revenue rose 10 percent, to \$602 million.

If we paid a penny-per-pound extra for tomatoes to help these po'-boy pickers, that would cost us about \$250,000 each year, or about \$62,500 per quarter, which is roughly the price of a really nice Lexus SUV. (I could buy about 82 Lexus SUV's with my 2006 total compensation, but Lloyd could buy 13 times that many, or about 1,066 Lexus SUVs, which isn't fair to me.)

We refuse to give into that kind of pressure.

But we remain a compassionate company. Recently, we gave \$25,000 out of our own pockets to the Redlands Christian Migrant Association, which helps po'-boys. That's roughly enough to buy a Double Whopper for every unwashed, Spanish-speaking, tomato-picking po'-boy in south Florida.

So Merry Christmas all you po'-boys, and remember — Support America, and Visit Your Local Burger King, Today!

Sincerely,

Johnny

Mr. John W. Chidsey

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(NON-FICTION NOTE: John Chidsey is the 42-year-old CEO of Burger King. All figures cited here were taken from actual news reports in The New York Times and elsewhere.)

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