It is no secret that Florida’s farm workers often face unideal working environments. Cast out in the Florida heat, impenetrable humidity and unpredictable weather, workers are subject to both the elements and their employers who refuse to provide them safe work environments.

Farm owners often take advantage of this unfortunate reality by immersing workers in environments leaking with toxic pesticide fumes and lacking basic amenities such as restrooms. Despite the efforts made by legislation to protect farm worker rights with labor laws such as The Fair Labor Standards Act and The National Labor Relations Act, a great majority of workers are still unable to make ends meet under atrocious conditions.

These issues are “nothing new, this is an ongoing issue for farm workers made worse by the pandemic,” said Lucy Ortiz, a local activist and outreach manager at the Center for Abused Women and Children. Ortiz said she experienced years in the fields when she moved to the United States 55 years ago after marrying a migrant farmer. “Trucks would come by and spray for pesticides. They would send everyone out, then say ‘come back’ right after,” said Ortiz. “People would get very sick.”

The United States has since enforced measures such as the United States Environmental Protection Agency’s (US EPA) 2015 Worker Protection Standard, which requires farms to educate workers on pesticide safety and minimize their exposure in order to protect worker’s rights. Yet, many still refer to farming practices as “modern day slavery” due to the exclusionary nature of labor laws that offer minimal protections workers.

“In the wake of a pandemic, the Coronavirus has only made workers’ conditions worse with many suddenly being laid off and minimal protection from the virus. Farm workers have experienced a sudden reduction in hours,” said Claudia Gonzalez, the Homestead organizer of the Farmworker Association.

“Where’s the justice in this story of harsh working conditions and low wages? It’s not the right place,” said Mia Clarke, Junior Volunteer. Clarke, a junior at the University of Florida, said she volunteers at the Homestead Farmworker Association to bring awareness to farmers’ rights. “You just walk into Whole Foods and grab whatever you want, you don’t really think about these issues.”

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