

WHO'S PICKING YOUR FRUIT?

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**.

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For farm workers that may have come to the United States illegally, possible deportation weighs heavily on their shoulders. For some, otherwise unable to provide for their families without the compensation promised by cheap farm labor in South Florida's fruit farms, it is a risk they are willing to take. In 2018, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) estimated that roughly half of hired farmworkers do not have legal immigration status and earned an average of \$13.96 per hour in 2019. With the low wages earned from bringing handpicked produce to our tables, farm workers can often hardly afford to feed themselves and their families.

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."

"You just walk into Whole Foods and grab whatever you want, you don't really think about these issues."

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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. "Our organization hears stories every day of workers not having access to clean drinking water, shade, restrooms and exposure to pesticides because there are no regulations enforced," said Silvia Perez of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, a human-rights organization that protects rights in the workplace.

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.