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Catholic leaders pray accord will improve conditions for farmworkers

by Chaz Muth by Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON (CNS) -- Catholic and U.S. Senate leaders applauded an agreement between Burger King Corp. and a farmworkers' organization signed May 23 to raise the price paid to laborers, which they hope will lead to an industrywide revolution in social responsibility.

Following a week at the negotiating table with the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, Burger King officials agreed to pay an additional penny per pound to the Florida farmworkers who harvest their tomatoes.

The company also will pay incremental payroll taxes and administrative costs the growers will incur as a result of the increased wages for the farmworkers, making the total boost 1.5 cents per pound, said Amy E. Wagner, a senior vice president for Burger King Corp., based in Miami.

This increase will translate collectively to about \$250,000 in the paychecks of tomato farm laborers, Wagner said.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops had urged Burger King officials to join companies like McDonald's, Pizza Hut, Kentucky Fried Chicken and Taco Bell, which signed similar agreements with the Florida farmworkers coalition, and hopes more corporations in the food industry will follow suit, said John L. Carr, executive director for the USCCB's Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development.

"Today we are one step closer to building a world where we, as farmworkers, can enjoy a fair wage and humane working conditions," said Lucas Benitez, a founder of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers,

based in Immokalee, Fla. "This agreement should send a strong message to the rest of the restaurant and supermarket industry."

Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt. -- along with Sens. Richard Durbin, D-Ill., Sherrod Brown, D-Ohio, and Edward Kennedy, D-Mass. -- urged Burger King officials to open a dialogue with the farmworkers after traveling to Florida to see what he described as deplorable living conditions among the workers.

Sanders also said the tomato laborers are perhaps the most exploited workers in the United States.

"What I saw shocked me," he said. "Vermont may be far from Florida, but what I saw warranted action. Vermont was the first state in America to abolish slavery. So, when we see slavery going on in our country, we get involved."

The May 23 agreement, signed in a packed briefing room in the Capitol, also establishes zero-tolerance guidelines that call for the fast-food company to immediately terminate its relationship with any grower in its supply chain who engages in unlawful labor practices, Wagner said.

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"We have also agreed to active farmworker participation in monitoring the grower's compliance with the company's robust vendor code of conduct," she said.

The Coalition of Immokalee Workers began in 1993 as a small group of field hands who met in a hall at a Catholic parish in Venice, Fla. It now boasts more than 2,500 members who work in agriculture on the East Coast.

The organization had been trying to get Burger King to the bargaining table for several months, but it wasn't until this May that the two sides were able to hammer out an agreement.

"We wanted to come up with a mechanism to get the money directly to the workers," Wagner said. "That took some time to figure out."

The USCCB urged the coalition, Burger King, tomato growers and other food companies to continue to fight for justice for farmworkers, said Bishop William F. Murphy, chairman of the bishops' Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development.

"In this particular case, the Catholic bishops of Florida and the Catholic Campaign for Human Development have provided consistent and concrete support for the Coalition of Immokalee Workers," Bishop Murphy said in a prepared statement, "and for the legitimate demands for justice for farmworkers."

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