

Tasteless Tomatoes and Slave Labor in Florida's Factory Farms

Tomatoland: How Modern Industrial Agriculture Destroyed Our Most Alluring Fruit, by Barry Estabrook. Kansas City: Andrews McMeel, 2012.

Reviewed by Ian-Paul Poulos

Driving down I-75 behind a large gravel truck a few years back, Barry Estabrook thought he saw a clutch of green apples bouncing off the back. Skidding to a stop for a closer look, he realized that they were instead green tomatoes. But dropping onto the pavement at high speed failed to smash, crack, or even scratch the fallen fruits. In fact, they were completely free of all blemishes, glistening like those we have become accustomed to find on grocery shelves year-round

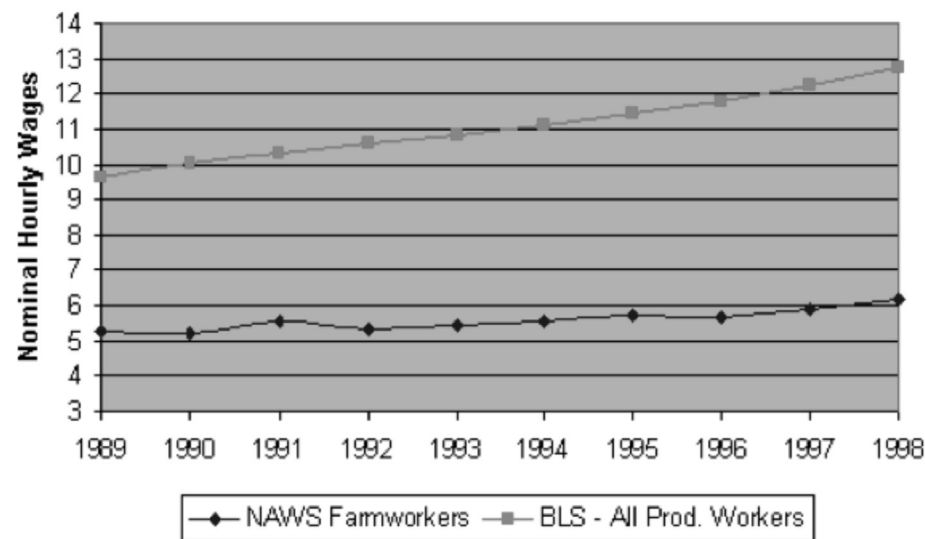
The seemingly indestructible nature of the tomatoes led Estabrook to an in-depth investigation of the huge Florida tomato industry, source of “one-third of the fresh tomatoes raised in the United States, and from October to June, virtually all the fresh-market, field-grown tomatoes in the country.”¹ Why, he wonders, does the taste of the industrial farmed fruit falls so far short of the home-grown variety in his own backyard garden? This leads him into a very dark and, in many ways, antiquated world that stubbornly strives for maximum profits, regardless of the effects on worker health or product quality.² He looks into three main problem areas: working conditions, workers’ legal and economic status, and growers’ focus on tomato quantity over quality. Then he shifts to possible solutions, including worker coalition pressure groups and alternatives to the traditional industrial farming model.

One of the most palpable aspects of Florida tomato farming is the use of pesticides and other dangerous chemicals that workers are exposed to on a daily basis. Estabrook recounts speaking with workers who become drenched with these liquid carcinogens while working in the fields. The opportunity cost of creating hospitable growing conditions in the poor Florida soil is substantial. As Estabrook explains, “an acre of Florida tomatoes gets hit with five times as much

fungicide and six times as much pesticide as an acre of California tomatoes.”³ In fact, chemical use is so prevalent in the American agricultural sector that these workers have the highest probability of facing pesticide poisoning of any other worker, in any sector, handling pesticides.⁴ At this point, the looming question is: are these conditions just a necessary part of the industry, or is there more to understand?

The author discovers that workers are being routinely exposed to dangerous substances either by force or through ignorance. In the early pages, he explains that three women were ordered to pick tomatoes in a “restricted-entry interval” zone without being warned of the possible dangers involving pesticide exposure. The REI designation is used by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to indicate when a parcel of land is off limits due to a recent pesticide application. As a result of their exposure, all three women bore children with severe birth defects. In looking at other women,

Figure 1. Chart 3. Farmworker and Production Worker Wages: 1989-1998



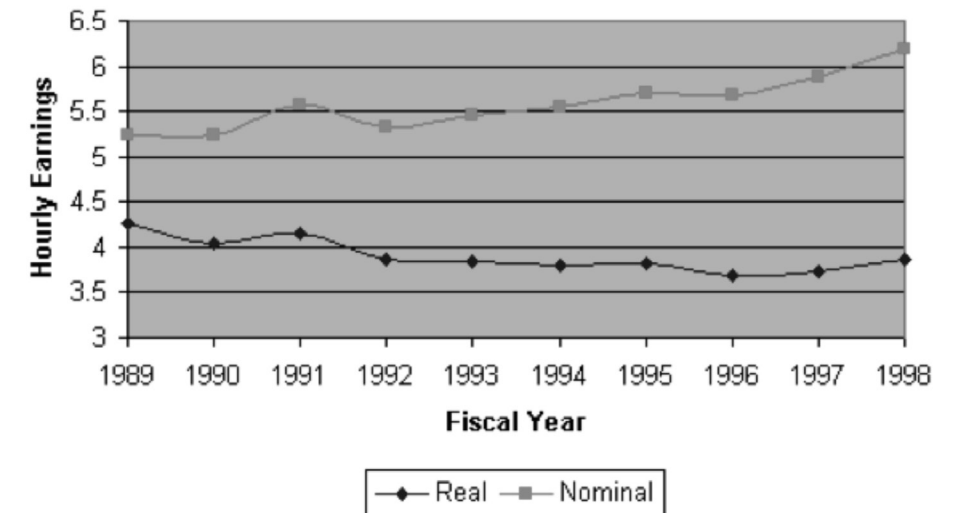
Source: U.S. Department of Labor Report to Congress: The Agricultural Labor Market – Status and Recommendations

it becomes clear that there is a link between working near pesticides and birth defects, for while the “average is 3 percent, 13 percent of the Apopka workers had a child born with a defect.”⁵ The most dangerous aspect of the chemicals, however, is that exposure does not have to occur from direct contact with a sprayed plant. Workers can inhale equally damaging vapors from neighboring application sites. In short, workers are either untrained and ignorant of dangers involving pesticides or they are forced to violate training procedure, but why is this the case?

A recurring theme in *Tomatoland* is the prevalence of modern-day slavery conditions. The argument is that migrants continue to work in horrible conditions because they are forced to. Although few are aware of it, slavery cases are today surprisingly common, and Immokalee – the forefront of Florida tomato production – is the epicenter of the country’s modern farm slavery problem. The US Attorney for Florida’s Middle District works on six to twelve slavery cases at any given time.⁶ Work crew subcontractors are paid to provide a tomato-picking workforce, and are given free reign by farmers to use any means necessary. Farmers accept no responsibility for the abusive ways that many subcontractors treats their workers. This system sets the foundations for treating people like property and maintaining control through fear and debt peonage. One of the most notorious slavery cases described by Estabrook involved the Miguel A. Flores Harvesting operation. Flores would hire his crews based on three conditions: no legal documentation, no knowledge of English, and little education. He would then perpetually indent his already helpless workers with exorbitant transportation charges and instill fear through physical and mental abuse. It is no wonder that the turnover rate in Florida “can be as high as 40 percent every year.”⁷

Unfortunately, working conditions are just one element of worker oppression. Wages have remained stagnant in this sector for years. At one point, conditions became so worrisome that the issue garnered the attention of the United States Department of Labor (DOL), which documented its concerns in a letter to Congress in December of 2000. The DOL noted that, while there had been significant increases across the economy’s agricultural sector, none of the benefits were being shared with the workers. Two graphs included in the report are especially telling. In the 1990s boom, agricultural workers did receive a greater nominal hourly wage, but this increase was significantly outpaced by nonfarm private sector workers. As can be seen in Figure 1, the farm worker’s national

Figure 2. Chart 4. Real and Nominal Wages: 1989-1998



Source: U.S. Department of Labor Report to Congress: The Agricultural Labor Market – Status and Recommendations

hourly wage remained relatively low and stagnant.⁸ This disparity, however, is even greater than it appears. When adjusting for inflation, farm workers held more buying power in the mid-1980s than in the late 1990s (Figure 2).⁹ And more recent statistics show scant improvement. According to 2010 Bureau of Labor Statistics numbers (Figure 3), agricultural workers are making about half of the median annual wage of other occupations.¹⁰ DOL National Agricultural Worker Survey statistics compiled by the Alliance for Fair Food indicate that although the living wage for an individual Immokalee worker is \$18,486, the average farm worker wage sits at or below the Federal Poverty line of \$10,210 (in 2007 dollars).¹¹ To add insult to injury, most tomato pickers are paid through a 50 cent per 32-pound bucket piece rate system that has remained stagnant for decades, and “in real terms, tomato pickers today actually earn about half of what they earned 30 years ago.”¹²

In terms of legal oppression, a common criticism has involved the agricultural worker exception to the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) of 1935 and the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) of 1938. Exclusion from the NLRA means that the tomato and other agricultural workers do not have the right to collective bargaining, and the exemption in the FLSA removes the minimum wage and overtime pay requirements. According to an Oxfam America report, Immokalee workers can expect to be at work “10 to 12 hours a day, 7 days a week, during a harvest” without receiving any overtime pay.¹³

In addition to working conditions and migrants’ legal and economic conditions, the growers’ focus on produce quantity over quality is

an overarching theme throughout the entire exposé. As the industry developed, Estabrook explains that specialist breeders would cross breed types of tomato plants in an effort to create the ultimate tomato. The problem is that the standards set by the Florida Tomato Committee dictate which tomatoes can and cannot be sold on the market. Since taste is not a part of the standard, it has been subsequently bred out of the current industrial tomato plants. Taste has given way to increased tomato size, yield, toughness, and perfection in shape. Harry Klee of the University of Florida explains that “if you ask commercial seed companies why they are making tomato varieties that have lost all their flavor, the answer is very simple...They focused all their energies on their customers. Who are their customers? The commercial growers. What does a grower get paid for? Yield, size, and appearance.”¹⁴ For the growers to return to producing tasty tomatoes, the standards will have to be altered. But growers see no reason for change because they fear a transition will impose substantial costs. Under the current system, tomatoes are picked before they have time to mature – that is, while they are still hard and green. They are then placed into an ethylene chamber so that they can acquire an artificial red hue before being shipped off to the marketplace. Even though massive amount of pesticides are used and workers are abused and underpaid, the tomatoes are still selling, so there is no reason for change from the growers’ perspective.

It is important to note a significant counter-theme presented by Estabrook. While the tomato industry has repeatedly sought to maintain its antiquated systems, there are two groups of people that have been challenging industry practices. The first is a group of

Immokalee tomato pickers who have decided to fight against the oppression. The second is a collection of individual farmers that have chosen to use alternative farming methods to raise their crops. The Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) is comprised of Latino, Mayan Indian, and Haitian agricultural immigrants working throughout the state of Florida. It formed in 1993 and currently represents roughly 5,000 workers from different facets of the agricultural industry.¹⁵ In one of its most early activist events, the CIW staged an uprising outside of an agricultural boss’ house for beating a sixteen-year-old Guatemalan boy for taking a drink in the field. Since then, the CIW’s most notable accomplishment is arguably its Campaign for Fair Food. This campaign emerged out of the realization that the farmers do not control the price mechanism that sets tomato prices. The Immokalee saw that the real price setters were the companies ultimately buying the tomatoes. In seeking an increase in the wage, the CIW aimed the Campaign for Food at company tomato buyers, asking for a penny more per pound of tomatoes gathered.

The first target was Taco Bell. Through a massive organization effort, Taco Bell brand owner Yum! agreed to the CIW conditions by 2005.¹⁶ Since then, numerous other fast food conglomerates have joined the Campaign for Fair Food – such as Burger King and McDonalds, but it was not until the Florida Tomato Growers Exchange adopted the CIW conditions that real change occurred. The reason for this is because the growers were the only holders of farm employment records, and they would follow the Exchange’s lead, so without the Exchange’s participation there was no practical way for the Campaign money to be distributed among the workers.

While the Exchange was resisting CIW initiatives, the extra penny per pound was accumulating in escrow accounts.¹⁷ However, after the Exchange supported the CIW, many growers followed, and this meant that workers could finally have access to the one penny per pound increase promised under the Campaign for Fair Food.

After encountering success in the fast food industry, the CIW has since turned its attention to supermarkets. At the moment, one of its primary targets has been Publix Supermarket. In their most recent attempts, the CIW staged a fast outside the Publix Lakeland headquarters, but at this point, Publix has agreed to pay the money but refused to join the Campaign. The supermarket argues that it should not get involved with wage issues that are not directly related to the company.¹⁸

In the final pages of his book, Estabrook writes about an alternative to the current industrial tomato farming methods. While the tomato industry continually shows resistance to change, Estabrook points out that there is a better way to farm. At the moment, the industry is producing tomatoes that lack taste. The current production methods have discounted the importance of taste, holding appearance and size as more important standards for tomato sales. Two farms mentioned by Estabrook show how a grower can provide higher pay and better working conditions while producing a high quality tomato. Tom Beddard of Lady Moon Farms has been “growing tomatoes and other vegetable crops in South Florida using purely organic practices. ...”¹⁹ In 2008, Beddard was approached by Whole Foods, one of his buyers, and asked to comply with the CIW’s Campaign for Fair Food conditions. After examining his records, he noticed that he had already exceeded the standards set by the CIW, and he was perplexed as to why the other companies were fighting so hard over giving the pickers another penny per pound. Another farmer mentioned by Estabrook was located in Pennsylvania. Tim Stark is the owner of Eckerton Hill Farm. Stark provides free housing, pays between 10 and 15 dollars per hour – well above minimum wage, gives annual bonuses, and provides workers compensation and unemployment insurance.²⁰ Ultimately, as demonstrated by Estabrook, Beddard and Stark are two excellent examples of what the industrial agriculture could be. The difference between how Beddard and Stark approach business in comparison to the rest of the industry involves the “gardener’s mentality.” In essence, this entails a shift in priorities – that is, a move away from creating uniform tomatoes and toward embracing elements of the plant as they were meant to be.

Barry Estabrook’s exposé makes a strong case that the American agricultural industry has turned dangerously far away from its original gardening origins. He documents poor, inhospitable working conditions, difficult economic and legal obstacles, and an unhealthy imbalance of produce quantity over quality. The book is not without its shortcomings. For example, it does not address gender inequality. Both the Human Rights Watch²¹ and Oxfam Report²² reveal a climate of sexual harassment and a lack of equal opportunity for female migrants. Nevertheless, Estabrook shows convincingly how the industrial farming industry could change without much real employer sacrifice, by adopting a renewed emphasis on the “gardeners’ mentality.” Ultimately, this requires putting the tomato’s natural qualities, as well as worker and consumer health, ahead of everything else.

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NOTES:

- 1 Estabrook, Barry. *Tomatoland: How Modern Industrial Agriculture Destroyed Our Most Alluring Fruit*. Kansas City: Andrews McMeel, 2011: x
- 2 Ibid, xvii
- 3 Ibid, pg 27
- 4 Ibid, pg 43
- 5 Ibid, pg 47
- 6 Ibid, pg 75
- 7 Ibid, pg 46
- 8 “U.S. Department of Labor Report to Congress: The Agricultural Labor Market – Status and Recommendations.” *Migration Dialogue*. Web. (4/20/13).
- 9 Ibid
- 10 “Occupational Outlook Handbook.” U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. *U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics* (8/31/12).
- 11 “Facts and Figures on Florida Farmworkers.” Alliance for Fair Food. *Alliance for Fair Food*, Web. (4/21/13).
- 12 Facts and Figures on Florida Farmworkers, *Op. Cit.*
- 13 *Like Machines in the Fields: Workers without Rights in American Agriculture*. Rep. Oxfam America, Mar. 2004.
- 14 Estabrook, *Op. Cit.*, pg 148
- 15 “About CIW.” Coalition of Immokalee Workers. Coalition of Immokalee Workers, Web. (4/23/13).
- 16 “Immokalee Tomato Pickers Win Campaign Against Taco Bell.” Democracy Now! (3/10/2005).
- 17 Estabrook, *Op. Cit.*, pg 120
- 18 Campbell, Janie. “Coalition of Immokalee Workers Fast Outside Publix’s Lakeland Headquarters.” *The Huffington Post*. TheHuffingtonPost.com, (3/5/12).
- 19 Estabrook, *Op. Cit.*, pg 154
- 20 Estabrook, *Op. Cit.*, pg 182
- 21 “Cultivating Fear The Vulnerability of Immigrant Farmworkers in the US to Sexual Violence and Sexual Harassment.” *Hrw.org*. Human Rights Watch, May 2012.
- 22 *Like Machines in the Fields, Op. Cit.*

Figure 3.
Agricultural Workers: Median annual wages, May 2010



Note: All Occupations include all occupations in the US Economy.
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Employment Statistics.