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## Burger King Grants Raise to Pickers

By [ANDREW MARTIN](#)

After a contentious battle that included allegations of spying, Burger King announced on Friday that it had reached an agreement to improve the wages and working conditions of tomato pickers in Florida.

At a news conference on Capitol Hill, the hamburger chain, based in Miami, said it would pay tomato prices adequate to give workers a wage increase of 1.5 cents a pound. A penny a pound will go into the workers' pockets. The extra half-cent is intended to cover additional payroll taxes and administrative costs for tomato growers.

The 1-cent increase means that for every 32-pound bucket of tomatoes they pick, the workers will earn 77 cents, instead of 45 cents. That is a 71 percent increase, the first substantial one in decades for the workers. At the old wage, a farm workers' group said, the pickers typically earned \$10,000 to \$12,000 a year.

"If the Florida tomato industry is to be sustainable long term, it must become more socially responsible," said Amy Wagner, a senior vice president at Burger King. She estimated that the wage boost would cost Burger King about \$300,000 a year.

In a statement, Burger King's chief executive, John W. Chidsey, said he was sorry for previous negative remarks directed toward an activist group that has fought on behalf of the pickers, the Coalition for Immokalee Workers. Immokalee is a town in southwest Florida where many of the farm workers live in decrepit shacks and trailers.

Mr. Chidsey praised the workers' organization as "being on the forefront of efforts to improve farm labor conditions, exposing abuses and driving socially responsible purchasing and work practices in the Florida tomato fields."

McDonalds and Yum Brands, the parent of Taco Bell, had already agreed to similar deals. But it remained unclear on Friday if workers would receive the pay increase, because Florida tomato growers had resisted it.

The Florida Tomato Growers Exchange, which represents 90 percent of the state's tomato growers, told The News-Press in Fort Myers, Fla., on Thursday that it was withdrawing its threat of imposing \$100,000 fines on members who provided a penny-a-pound pay raise.

Reggie Brown, the exchange's executive vice president, told the Florida newspaper that he remained troubled by legal questions prompted by the raise and was advising members not to participate.

Mr. Brown could not be located for comment on Friday.

The announcement was hailed by some members of Congress and by farm workers' organizations, who had waged a vigorous campaign that included petition drives and Congressional hearings.

Senator [Bernard Sanders](#), an Independent of Vermont, said the working conditions of the tomato pickers were a “national and international embarrassment,” and he praised Burger King for agreeing to raise wages.

“We all know that this has been a long and hard road for Burger King,” he said.

Lucas Benitez, of the Coalition for Immokalee Workers, said he was thankful that Burger King agreed to the wage increase, and he said his group would now set its sights on other restaurant chains and grocery retailers who continue to pay wages his group regards as substandard.

Noting that some of those companies market themselves as being socially responsible, Mr. Benitez, co-founder of the farm workers’ group, said, “It is time for those companies to live out the true meaning of their marketers’ words.

Friday’s announcement was a sharp departure for Burger King, which had vigorously fought increasing its tomato costs. Burger King acknowledged, for instance, that it had hired a private security firm to obtain information about student and farm worker organizations that were demanding price increases. The company has since severed its ties to the security firm.

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