

# LUCAS BENITEZ

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Lucas Benitez, a member of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers and a farm worker himself, has become a leader in the fight to end slave labor, human trafficking and exploitation in agricultural fields across America. The CIW worked with Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights to lobby major produce buyers in the fast food industry to implement an industry-wide surcharge on Florida tomatoes that will provide a livable wage for Florida's farm workers. In March 2005 and April 2007, CIW signed historic agreements with Yum! Brands (parent company for Taco Bell) and McDonald's, respectively, implementing the CIW's demand for the one-penny-more-per-pound wage increase. RFK Human Rights and CIW are working to broaden consumer and government awareness to create laws that eliminate the exploitation and enslavement of U.S. farm workers. RFK Human Rights is also a founding member of the Alliance for Fair Food (AFF), a network of human rights, religious, student, labor and grassroots organizations dedicated to advancing the human rights of farm workers.

Farming has become a multi-billion-dollar industry in which corporations negotiate with growers to purchase mass quantities of product for the lowest possible prices. To maintain profits and income for growers, suppliers and labor contractors, farm workers' wages have been reduced to far below poverty levels. Furthermore, farm workers' rights to organize and collectively bargain are not protected by the National Labor Relations Act. Many of these workers have become enslaved and victims of gross human rights abuses. In response to this crisis, the CIW, a farm workers' rights group, was developed to promote change across the fast food industry.



Jeffery Allan Salter

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“THE RIGHT TO A JUST WAGE, THE RIGHT TO WORK FREE OF FORCED LABOR, THE RIGHT TO ORGANIZE—THREE OF THE RIGHTS IN THE UNITED NATIONS’ UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS—ARE ROUTINELY VIOLATED WHEN IT COMES TO FARM WORKERS IN THE UNITED STATES.”

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REMARKS BY LUCAS BENITEZ (CIW): 2003 RFK HUMAN RIGHTS  
AWARD CEREMONY, NOVEMBER 20, 2003

Mrs. Kennedy, Senator Kennedy, and Mrs. Kerry Kennedy, I bring you thanks from all the members of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers for this wonderful day.

But before I begin, I feel that I must tell you that today my *companeros* and I feel a little disoriented, as if we were lost in a sort of dream world where you can no longer know just what is real.

Just two days ago, we marched into downtown Miami surrounded by nearly 3,000 police—police in riot gear, mounted police, police on bicycles, police on foot, police in helicopters hovering above Miami's skyline, their propellers beating out the soundtrack to what seemed to us like a movie about martial law in the U.S.—all because we were there to call for fair trade that respects human rights, not free trade that exploits human beings.

Yet today, we stand here in this historic city—in the heart of the U.S. government—receiving this prestigious award for our work in defense of human rights.

Truth is, my *companeros* and I are confused. It's hard for us to understand in which of the two worlds we actually live—in the world where the voice of the poor is feared and protest in defense of human rights is considered the gravest of threats to public security? Or in the world where the defense of human rights is celebrated and encouraged in the pursuit of a more just and equitable society?

While this question may well be the most complex and important question that we must face in this new century, there is no doubt about how Robert F. Kennedy would answer were he still with us today. He—like that other great hero who was torn away from us 35 years ago, Dr. Martin Luther King—would have been there with us in the streets of Miami, quite possibly feeling the same fear we felt facing such overwhelming force arrayed against us, but carried forward by faith and by his powerful commitment to social justice.

This award today is the proof, testimony to Robert Kennedy's vision, his belief that we as workers and poor people also are part of this democracy, that our voices must be a part of this country's

great chorus and our interests taken into account, because without justice, true peace, lasting peace, is not possible.

Looking around at the people here today—we see workers and CEOs, students and religious, artists, politicians, prosecutors from the Department of Justice, union leaders, friends, family members, colleagues from the Freedom Network, shareholders, civil rights activists—I can assure you that it isn't every day that you find all these people in the same room!

But in all seriousness, we are united here despite our different lives and points of view. What brings us together is a feeling that we all have in common, something deeply rooted in our humanity—we are all disgusted by the fact that fundamental human rights continue to be violated in this day and age in this great country.

Behind the shiny, happy images promoted by the fast-food industry with its never-ending commercials on TV, fueled by over \$3 billion in marketing annually, and behind the supermarket advertising that celebrates the abundance of our harvest each Thanksgiving, there is another reality.

Behind those images, the reality is that there are farm workers who contribute their sweat and blood so that enormous corporations can profit, all the while living in sub-poverty misery, without benefits, without the right to overtime or protection when we organize. Others are working by force, against their will, terrorized by violent employers, under the watch of armed guards, held in modern-day slavery. The right to a just wage, the right to work free of forced labor, the right to organize—three of the rights in the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights—are routinely violated when it comes to farm workers in the United States.

Is this the true face of democracy in the 21st century? Is this all we can hope for our future and for our children's future?

We answer from the bottom of our hearts: NO! We can—we must—hope for a better world, because a better world IS possible!

So, it's left to us to continue struggling in that same spirit, for a world where poor people, people without a voice, demand and obtain the respect and dignity due to them, where corporations no longer define the limits of our liberty, where they don't dictate our dreams, fence in our imagination, and block the roads toward our destiny.

And in this same spirit, I want to close with a special greeting to all our fellow members of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers. We had to leave the march in Miami in order to come here, but they are continuing with the struggle, continuing with the work of building, step by step, another, better world.

As Robert F. Kennedy said, "Some see the world as it is today and ask why. I see the world as it could be and ask, why not?" His vision of 35 years ago is by no means lost—we of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers are marching toward that vision today. Thank you.