

TEACHING TOLERANCE



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MIDDLE & UPPER GRADES ACTIVITY

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Oranges

Stand in a grocery store and think of Florida. Chances are you'll think of orange juice.

Decades of jingles have engrained in our culture the notion that Florida sunshine comes in half-gallons, gushing with goodness. "Throughout the ages," the state reminds us, "the citrus fruit has been a symbol of eternal love, happiness, and even holiness."

Those are not the words we hear from Catalina, Veronica, Maria and others who help form the unseen army of 20,000 undocumented workers who pick Florida's juicy Valencia oranges. They tell stories of living in poverty and being cheated out of wages, exposed to pesticides and subjected to rampant sexual harassment.

The disconnect between OJ's image and reality is a shameful example of the hidden costs in our food, costs borne by the hands that feed us.

Christopher Columbus brought oranges to Florida in 1493 and they've been a major crop—America's chief source of OJ—since before the Civil War. Today, the average picker works 1,500 hours each season, climbing wooden ladders into each of the state's 60 million trees, dropping each orange, one-by-one, into a canvas sack slung over the shoulder. When full, the worker climbs down and dumps the 90-pound bag into a large bin. It takes 10 bags to fill the bin, which is then picked up by a tractor.

A full bin pays \$8 to \$10, or about 80 cents for each 90-pound bag. A fast worker in a high-producing grove can fill eight to 10 bags an hour and earn, at best, \$15,000 for the eight-month season. Drought and disease in orange groves have lowered these wages in recent years.

It takes 18 oranges to make a half gallon of juice, which brings \$3.59 in grocery stores. The picker gets 3.5 cents, about 1 percent.

Picking oranges has always attracted migrant labor. But over the past 25 years, orange growers—squeezed by Brazilian imports and supported by laissez faire government policies—have joined in a "race to the bottom" in which undocumented workers are routinely exploited, cheated and abused, says Greg Schell of the Migrant Farmworker Justice Project in Florida. Labor rates have remained unchanged.

Countless Latino workers, weary and frightened after a harrowing passage across the U.S.-Mexico border, find their first work in Florida's 400,000 acres of picturesque orange groves. Unable to speak or read English, isolated from family and ignorant of wage and worker rules, they are America's most vulnerable and fungible work force. Here, for example, is an excerpt from an interview with Catalina, a 33-year-old Guatemalan:

Q: Do you know what minimum wage is?

A: No ... I don't know how to read to check the amounts or dates.

Q: Why don't you ask them?

A: When I'm a person with papers, or a man, maybe I can complain. But because I need to work, and I don't have papers, I don't have rights. I'm better off keeping quiet, even if they pay me \$20 or \$30.