



PLANT NURSERY WORKERS

HACK PACK

BACKGROUND

Less than an hour from the glitter of South Beach, tens of thousands of agricultural workers support the vast agribusiness infrastructure of Miami-Dade County. The fastest growing sector of that infrastructure are plant nurseries – raising and marketing horticultural plants – including trees, foliage, potted plants, potted flowering plants, and bedding/garden plants. Because of its unique subtropical climate, Miami-Dade County, and in particular the Southwest region of the county, remains the largest producer of tropical plants of any county in Florida, despite considerable pressures of urban development.

Despite the proximity of these workers and their communities to the Miami metropolis, they and their working conditions at plant nurseries are largely invisible to the general public. In addition to the prevalence of **low wages** and **wage theft** throughout the industry, **pesticide poisoning and accidents** on the job are common and the legal and regulatory systems provide inadequate support to poisoned and injured farm workers. Mistreatment of workers, including **sexual harassment of female plant nursery workers**, is widespread.

A high percentage of plant nursery workers are still employed by small producers that have been squeezed by brokers and the largest nursery, which has contracts with the mega-retailers. These small producers in turn have squeezed their workers, who often earn minimum wage or below. These indignities and abuses are allowed to persist because workers in Homestead are isolated and many of their working conditions remain unknown to the greater public. As fellow Miamians, we must strive to ensure that all workers are treated with dignity, paid a living wage, and have safe and humane working conditions.

Keep this context in mind as you use the diverse range of talents, perspectives, and disciplines in your JusticeHack team to address this issue.

PARTNER ORGANIZATION



WECOUNT!

WeCount! strives to build the power of Latin American immigrants and farm workers in Homestead, Florida to fulfill their aspirations of justice and equality through education, developing leaders, organizing, cultural work, building coalitions, and collective action.

WeCount! was recently granted a low-power FM radio permit and is currently working with a radio committee of 15 leaders and raising funds in preparation for a launch in late 2014 or early 2015. WeCount!'s greatest challenge is the limited financial resources to carry out the project. The goal of We Count!'s current project is to ensure that plant nursery workers in Miami-Dade County are treated with dignity, paid a living wage, and have safe, humane working conditions.

www.we-count.org

THE NUMBERS

1,500 – state certified nurseries in Miami-Dade. The plant nursery business in Miami-Dade County is the largest in Florida and second largest in the U.S.

40,000 - # of workers in the plant nursery labor force in 2005

\$1.9 Billion - total value of landscaping and nursery firm sales in Miami-Dade in 2005

Mexico and Guatemala – countries of origin, along with other Central American countries, for the majority of immigrants who live in the Homestead and Redlands areas and work in plant nurseries. Many of the workers are indigenous peoples who speak Spanish as a second language (sometimes poorly) and virtually no English.

1/3 - WeCount!'s estimate of the percentage of plant nursery workers that are female.

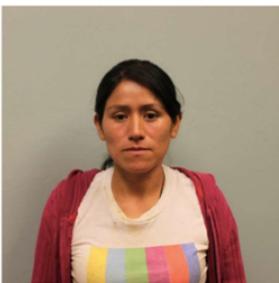
50 - estimated % of plant pesticide poisoning patients in Florida are plant nursery workers

COMMUNITY VOICES



Jaime is a farm worker in Homestead who was physically assaulted by his supervisor at a plant nursery. *“I still get headaches and my vision gets blurred sometimes from the blows I received from the supervisor of the company where I worked.”* Even though he was afraid, Jaime stood up for himself and called the cops, who arrested his supervisor.

Elvira, a 43 year old farm worker and mother of three discussed her experiences with pesticides in a focus group in Immokalee. *“You get a lot of rashes a lot of pain. Your face gets spotted. My face is completely discolored because of the work.”*



Carmela is a 32 year old farm worker and mother of one. Despite legal requirements that workers be trained in the use of pesticides within 5 days of the beginning of work, she was never trained until she went to the Coalition of Immokalee Workers. *“Sometimes when we work and*

they start spraying...your eyes get very red.” When asked if she was warned before pesticides were applied, she said, *“Sometimes yes, sometimes no. When they put up the sign that says you can’t enter because of the pesticides...I don’t think it is respected here, because the contractors will just go in and say: ‘Lets work!’ There was a moment when my head really hurt, but I held it in. I told the contractors, ‘My head hurts a little bit’ and he brought me Tylenol.”*

Julia described the verbal abuse and sexual harassment that she was forced to endure. *“Abuse – like scolding – still exists. If they see a person who cannot defend themselves they go against them. A person who doesn’t know how to speak well for example, they do it to them... There were those men who wanted to abuse women. They wanted to. But not me. They did say things to me ... but I don’t let them [touch me].”* She also recalled a case where a crew leader grabbed a married woman inappropriately. When her husband found out she explained that *“many ugly things happened”* and that *“the crew leader got killed by the husband.”*



The stories of Elvira, Carmela and Julia are taken from “The Fields: The Hidden Faces of Farmworker Women”, Association of Farmworker Opportunity Programs 2012.

PESTICIDE POISONING

In Florida in late 2009, farm worker Jovita Alfau, working in an open-air plant nursery in a rural swath of south Miami-Dade County, said she became dizzy and weak, with numbness in her mouth, and vomited. Alfau said she had been told to tend to hibiscus plants at the Homestead nursery less than 24 hours after they had been sprayed with the pesticide endosulfan. WeCount! and the Farmworker Association of Florida connected her with Karla Martinez of the Migrant Farmworker Justice Project, who filed a successful lawsuit on her behalf. The grower sent workers out too soon after the spraying, Alfau said in a lawsuit, violating the Worker Protection Standard, and did not tell her when pesticides were applied, provide protective gear or tell her how to protect herself.

Endosulfan is so toxic that, by summer 2010, the EPA banned its use, saying the pesticide “poses unacceptable risks to agricultural workers and wildlife.” Several days after falling ill, Alfau went to the doctor but was not asked about pesticides, said her lawyer. Alfau, a legal U.S. resident and Mexican native, is permanently disabled and her health continues to deteriorate.

“We have to run to the cars and close the windows because the plane is putting pesticides in the fields. After that happens, people feel sick,” said Yolanda Gomez, who began picking Florida oranges when she was nine and spent more than 30 years following the harvest from Florida to Washington State. “When you go to the field you go clean, and when you come out of the field you can see your eyes are very red.”

Gomez is now a community organizer for the Farmworker Association of Florida, in Apopka near Orlando. Farmworkers frequently trek into the office complaining of pesticide-related illnesses, she said.

“When you tell them, ‘Let’s make this paper and put your name on it so we can make a difference,’ they just won’t do it,” Gomez said. “I don’t have any papers. I have to work. This is the only way I can feed my family.’ They don’t see another way out of the system.”

The system, she said, “should care about the human side of the worker.”

ADDITIONAL READING

NEWS COVERAGE - Farm Workers Demand Protections From Pesticide Poisoning
<http://thinkprogress.org/immigration/2013/07/16/2307921/farm-workers-pesticide-poisoning/>

RESEARCH REPORT - Wage Matters & Globalization: South Florida's Low-Wage Immigrant Plant Nursery Workers and Business Protectionism in the Age of Neoliberalism
<http://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1899&context=etd>

VIDEO - Testimonial on Plant Nursery Abuses: <https://vimeo.com/101951823>
password: justicehack