

LIBRADA PAZ

“ABUSES OCCUR AND YOU ARE ALONE, AFRAID AND OFTEN THREATENED. THIS IS WHAT IT MEANS TO BE VULNERABLE. YOU CANNOT SAY OR DO ANYTHING. THIS IS WHAT IT MEANS WHEN THE LEGAL SYSTEM PERMITS ABUSE. JUSTICE BECOMES A WORD WITHOUT ANY MEANING. THIS IS HOW THE DREAMS OF SO MANY FARMWORKERS ARE BURIED IN THE FIELDS OF THIS COUNTRY.”

Librada Paz defends the dignity of immigrant farmworkers in the United States. At the age of 15, she left her indigenous community in southern Mexico in search of an opportunity to improve life for her family. She eventually made her way to New York where she found work in the fields picking vegetables and fruits. Working conditions were harsh and Librada labored in the fields ten hours a day seven days a week just to survive. For ten years, she experienced the harassment, abuse and discrimination that prevail in U.S. agriculture where the dignity and rights of farmworkers are routinely ignored.

Through her strength and passion, Librada became a leading voice for immigrant workers in fields and farms in New York and across the United States. Together with the Rural and Migrant Ministries (RMM), Librada played a key role in the passage of laws requiring that farmworkers be provided with drinking water and restrooms - basic necessities long denied.

Librada is a Council Member for the RMM and a member of the Alianza Campesina, a national women's farmworker movement. In 2012, Librada received the Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Award for her courageous work and ongoing struggle to improve the lives and working conditions of farmworkers in New York and beyond.



Librada Paz testifies on behalf of farmworker rights in Albany, NY. Next to Ms. Paz is Richard Iannuzzi, President of the New York State United Teachers.

REMARKS BY LIBRADA PAZ: 2012 RFK HUMAN RIGHTS AWARD CEREMONY, NOVEMBER 14, 2012

“My name is Librada Paz. Librada means liberty and Paz means peace. So my name is also my work. I am of the indigenous Mixtec people from southern Mexico. The history of the Mixtec is much older than the United States. Like so many indigenous peoples in our region, The Mixtec are culturally very rich, but most have known only poverty, discrimination and abandonment by a society that has turned its back on them. As a result, Mixtec language, culture and arts are at risk of extinction.

When I was 15 years old, I made the difficult decision to leave my home and begin the long journey north. I did not want to leave my family or my village, but I knew that opportunities in Oaxaca were scarce. If I stayed I would not reach my dream to study engineering and improve my family's situation. So I followed my sister and came to the United States, like millions of compatriots and Latin Americans. But instead of finding opportunity, I found myself picking fruits and vegetables in the fields.

I was only 15, but I quickly learned that in the fields of the United States I had to work at the pace of an adult. I learned about injustice, discrimination, suffering and vulnerability far from the warmth and protection of persons who could help me – far from my family. As a young girl I learned difficult lessons dealing with supervisors and contractors. For more than a decade, I experienced inhuman conditions working in the fields of the United States. In the fields of the United States I learned that farmworkers do not matter. Our security doesn't matter. Our thoughts don't matter. Our dignity doesn't matter.

My childhood ended in the United States. I lived a life shared by so many day laborers working long, arduous hours in the hot sun without rest. I know the pain that comes from being bent ten hours a day. I also know the fear of getting sick or having an accident and losing my job. The enormous discrimination that all farmworkers suffer is multiplied against women who suffer all types of abuse. Those that dare speak out are threatened, blacklisted, or even be deported. These fields and camps are often isolated and the growers can be violent. When growers feel they can do anything and suffer no consequences; this is terribly dangerous. You are challenging their bottom-line. You are questioning their authority. It is always dangerous to denounce an abuser when you live in the same town and the police will not listen to you.”

SINCE THE 1930S, FARMWORKERS ACROSS THE COUNTRY HAVE BEEN EXCLUDED FROM THE MOST FUNDAMENTAL LABOR PROTECTIONS IN THE UNITED STATES. TODAY, FARMWORKERS ARE STILL DENIED BASIC PROTECTIONS COMMON IN OTHER INDUSTRIES: MINIMUM WAGE, A DAY OF REST EACH WEEK, OVERTIME PAY, DISABILITY INSURANCE, COLLECTIVE BARGAINING, WORKER’S COMPENSATION, AND A SAFE AND SANITARY WORK ENVIRONMENT.

FARMWORKERS LIVE AND WORK IN MISERABLE CONDITIONS INCLUDING 16-HOUR WORKDAYS AND NO OVERTIME PAY OR PROTECTIONS FROM RETALIATORY FIRING. FARMWORKERS ALSO EXPERIENCE HIGHER RATES OF CANCER AND OTHER HEALTH RISKS DUE TO PESTICIDE AND HERBICIDE EXPOSURE. WOMEN AND GIRLS FACE ASSAULT AND ABUSE IN THE FIELDS EVERY DAY. UNDER CURRENT FEDERAL LAWS CHILDREN AS YOUNG AS 12 YEARS OLD MAY LEGALLY WORK IN AN INDUSTRY WHERE THEY ARE EXPOSED TO ALL THE DANGERS AND INDIGNITIES OF LARGE-SCALE AGRICULTURE.

FARMWORKERS IN NEW YORK STATE, IN PARTICULAR, ARE ALSO VICTIMS OF HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS AND DISCRIMINATION AS STATE LAW EXEMPTS FARMWORKERS FROM THE MOST BASIC WORKER PROTECTIONS.

“This is how the dreams of so many farmworkers are buried in the fields of this country.

Abuses occur and you are alone, afraid and often threatened. This is what it means to be vulnerable. You cannot say nor do anything. You are vulnerable because you are poor, because you are a woman, because you are indigenous and because you are a farmworker. This is what it means when the legal system permits abuse. Justice becomes a word without any meaning.

“What is our role in this situation? If we are indignant, if we are upset, we must act. We must be true friends and worthy neighbors of our sisters and brothers. We must join voices as equals because this situation doesn’t only affect farmworkers, it dehumanizes all who look away and ignore the suffering of those who are most vulnerable.

Discrimination is wrong. It was not acceptable in 1937 when discrimination against farmworkers was made law. And it is not acceptable today.

We have marched in our towns and in the capital at Albany. We have faced down Senators in hearings who have questioned our integrity, our story. We must remain calm, but we must be clear. We will not ignore the suffering of our neighbors.

We have made promising advances in New York, including passing three new laws that protect farmworkers right to clean water facilities, sanitation facilities, and a standardized minimum wage. These protections were the first farmworker-initiated laws in New York State’s history.

But we have much more work to do. We are helping field laborers understand their rights and how the political system works. We are opening education centers. We are translating for workers who have been injured and speak only Spanish or Mixtec. We are working to pass a law to end farmworker discrimination. We are not alone. We have diversity and strength. We will pass and implement this law.

I reached my childhood dream when I got my degree in engineering, but one dream follows another. Now I dream of life with dignity and free of discrimination.

Our cause is your cause.

Can we do this? Yes, we can! Szaa Kuu Szahá! ¡Si se puede!”

THE CONTINUING STRUGGLE OF THE IMMIGRANT FARMWORKER

LIBRADA PAZ

GRADE LEVEL: 6 - 8
HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUE: LABOR RIGHTS

UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS:

- **Article 4:** Freedom from Slavery
- **Article 23:** Right to Desirable Work and to Join Trade Unions
- **Article 24:** Right to Rest and Leisure
- **Article 25:** Right to Adequate Living Standard

GUIDING QUESTIONS:

- How does food get to our table?
- Under what conditions do farm workers live and work?
- Who is responsible for the safety of migrant farm laborers?

TIME REQUIREMENT:

210 Minutes

OBJECTIVES:

After this lesson, students will understand:

- The role migrant farm workers play in getting food from the fields to our plates.
- The history of farm workers rights in the United States.
- The continuing struggle for farm worker justice in New York State.

STUDENT SKILLS:

- Building background knowledge
- Understanding non-fiction texts
- Written expression
- Thinking critically
- Research and analyzing
- Peer review

MATERIALS:

- Computer
- White board or chalkboard
- Large Paper
- The film "*Viva La Causa: The Story of Cesar Chavez and A Great Movement for Social Justice*"

VOCABULARY:

- **Farm Worker**
- **Day-laborer**
- **Migrant Worker**
- **Rural and Migrant Ministries**
- **Agriculture**
- **Remuneration**
- **Chattel**
- **Pesticide**
- **Strike**
- **Boycott**
- **Non-violent protest**

CONCEPTS:

- **Migrant labor**
- **Wage theft**
- **Fair and safe working conditions**
- **Supply chain**
- **Human dignity**
- **Collective bargaining**
- **Overtime Pay**

TECHNOLOGY REQUIRED:

Internet

STUDENT ACTIVITIES

ANTICIPATORY SET:

- 1 In small groups, have students create a list of produce grown in New York State. Have each group select one member to read the list out loud. Ask one student to write the responses on the board.
- 2 Ask the students to select one item listed on the board and then spend 3 minutes writing what they know about that item.
- 3 Ask the students to share what they wrote about the produce they selected.
- 4 As a class, respond to the following questions:
 - o Was there a common theme among the responses?
 - o What did the responses focus on?
 - o What was omitted?
- 5 Pose the following question to the students to consider throughout the lesson: When you eat a meal, do you consider where the food came from and who was involved in getting that food to your table?

Note to teacher: This above question is meant to open the students thinking about where food comes from, not to make them feel bad if they have never considered their food sources.

ACTIVITY 1:

- 1 Have student's read the UN Student Resolution – Migration: Final Student Plan of Action December 1, 2006: <http://www.un.org/Pubs/CyberSchoolBus/>
- 2 Ask students to respond to the following questions:
 - o Were you aware of the migrant worker issue within the U.S.?
 - o What industries within the U.S. benefit from migrant workers?
 - o Did any of the concerns raised in the Plan of Action surprise you? If so, which ones.
 - o Did any of the recommendations surprise you?
 - o Do you think the farm workers would benefit from the adoption of this resolution? Why or why not?
 - o Should the condition of farm workers be less than that of other workers?
- 3 After the class discussion, have each student write one addition to the student platform for migrant farm workers.

ACTIVITY 2:

As a class watch Viva La Causa: The Story of Cesar Chavez and A Great Movement for Social Justice.

PART 1

Write Around

- 1 After watching the film, assign students to a group of five.
- 2 Distribute a large, blank piece of paper to each student and have each student put their initials in the upper left-hand margin.
- 3 Instruct the students to follow two rules:
 - o Use all the time for writing.
 - o Don't talk when passing the paper.
- 4 Reflecting on the film, ask students to write for three minutes. They should focus on their thoughts, reactions, questions and/or feelings about the film.
- 5 When time is up, have the students pass their paper to the person on their right. The student should read the entries on the page and just below the last entry, offer their response. The students can offer a reaction, a comment, ask questions, share a connection made, agree, disagree or raise a whole new idea.

- 6 Repeat the above step until every student in the group has an opportunity to comment.
- 7 When the paper returns to the originator, have the students read all the comments and see the conversation they started.
- 8 Discuss the comment sheets in the small groups.
- 9 As a whole class, share highlights, key ideas and common threads.
 - o What was one highlight?
 - o What sparked the most discussion?
 - o What sparked the most agreement? Disagreement?

PART 2

Time permitting, respond to the following questions from Southern Poverty Law Center's Teaching Tolerance Teacher's Guide:

- 1 What kind of injustice did the workers hope to undo by going on strike? How did these injustices undermine their humanity?
- 2 What is non-violence, and what role did it play in the struggle?
- 3 Why did the strikers need help from others? What kinds of things did the strikers ask them to do in support of la causa? Why were the actions of these allies important?
- 4 What factors motivated people to get involved in la causa?
- 5 What did workers gain as a result of the strike and boycott?
- 6 What did our nation gain in the process?
- 7 The title of the film is Viva La Causa, which means "Long live the cause." What message is the filmmaker trying to send?

CULMINATING ACTIVITY:

Librada Paz is a leader in working to achieve human rights for fellow farm workers in New York State.

- 1 As a class, read the following passage from the Farmworker Fair Labor Practices Act:
 - o The farmworkers fair labor practices act:
 - o grants collective bargaining rights to farm laborers;
 - o requires employers of farm laborers to allow at least 24 consecutive hours of rest each week;
 - o provides for a 10 hour work day for farm laborers;
 - o requires overtime rate at one and one-half times normal rate;
 - o makes provisions of unemployment insurance law applicable to farm laborers;
 - o provides sanitary code shall apply to all farm and food processing labor camps intended to house migrant workers, regardless of the number of occupants;
 - o provides for eligibility of farm laborers for workers' compensation benefits;
 - o requires employers of farm laborers to provide such farm laborers with claim forms for workers' compensation claims under certain conditions;
 - o requires reporting of injuries to employers of farmworkers.
- 2 Assign students to groups of 4.
- 3 Ask each group to select one provision listed above and write a supporting argument for passage of that provision.
- 4 As a class, and based on the above act, write a New York State Farm workers Bill of Rights.

BECOME A DEFENDER

Passage and adequate enforcement of the Farm Worker Fair Labor Act is a priority for Librada Paz and Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights.

Students can support passage of this act and advance the rights of farm workers by:

- 1 Hosting teach-ins about the various campaigns to advance farm workers rights.
- 2 Host a letter writing campaign to encourage New York State representatives to support farm worker's rights.
- 3 Take local action, if applicable, to support farm workers in your community.



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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Southern Poverty Law Center

<http://www.splcenter.org/>

The Southern Poverty Law Center is a nonprofit civil rights organization dedicated to fighting hate and bigotry, and to seeking justice for the most vulnerable members of society.

Founded by civil rights lawyers Morris Dees and Joseph Levin Jr. in 1971, the SPLC is known for tracking and exposing the activities of hate groups. Their Teaching Tolerance program produces and distributes – free of charge – documentary films, books, lesson plans and other materials that promote tolerance and respect in our nation's schools.

The Labor-Religion Coalition of New York State

<http://www.labor-religion.org/>

The Labor Religion Coalition of New York State works in partnership with social justice organizations across the state. They are housed in NYSUT headquarters and work closely with NYSUT on social justice education.

Labor-Religion, Rural and Migrant Ministry and the

Justice for Farmworkers movement

<http://ruralmigrantministry.org/>

<http://ruralmigrantministry.org/en/justice-farmworkers-campaign>

Labor-Religion partners with Rural and Migrant Ministry and the Justice for Farmworkers movement to bring about fair labor for NYS farm workers and lobby for the passage of the Farmworkers Fair Labor Practices Act.

Coalition of Immokalee Workers

<http://ciw-online.org/about.html>

The Coalition of Immokalee Workers is a grassroots organization of Latino, Mayan indigenous, and Haitian immigrants working in low-wage jobs across the state of Florida. Through their effective use of popular education and creative coalition building, the CIW's Campaign for Fair Food has secured a series of precedent-setting agreements with a dozen large purchasers of Florida tomatoes.

The Alliance for Fair Food (AFF)

<http://www.allianceforfairfood.org/>

AFF is a network of human rights, religious, student, labor, sustainable food and agriculture, environmental and grassroots organizations who work in partnership with the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW), an internationally recognized human rights organization working to eliminate modern-day slavery and sweatshop labor conditions from Florida agriculture.

Student/Farmworker Alliance (SFA)

<http://sfalliance.org/>

SFA is a national network of students and youth organizing with farm workers to eliminate sweatshop conditions and modern-day slavery in the fields. Using the creativity and savvy of diverse students from across the country, this network of student-activists has played a key role in bringing key fast food giants, such as Taco Bell, Burger King, and McDonalds, to the table with farmworkers.

Heroes and Saints & Other Plays by Cherríe Moraga

This collection of Moraga's first three successful plays established her as a leading Chicana playwright. *Heroes and Saints* has won particular critical acclaim due to its intervention in the history of the Chicano people. It grows out of the struggle of the United Farm Workers in 1988 and the revelations of a so-called cancer cluster in McFarland, California, in which many Chicano children were diagnosed with cancer or stricken with birth defects.

Interfaith Action

<https://floridaimmigrant.org/placemarks/interfaith-action-of-southwest-florida/>

Interfaith Action educates and animates people of faith to partner with the CIW in its efforts to improve wages in the fields, and put an end to modern-day slavery in the agricultural industry. Interfaith Action has been an innovative leader in connecting faith-based communities in the U.S. with creative and effective avenues to join farmworkers in their struggle.

Farmworker Justice

<http://fwjustice.org/>

Based in Washington, DC, Farmworker Justice is a nonprofit organization that advocates for improved living and working conditions for migrant and seasonal farm workers, addressing issues of immigration status, health, occupational safety and access to justice.

Modern-Day Slavery Museum

<http://ciw-online.org/museum/index.html>

The Modern-Day Slavery Museum consists of a cargo truck outfitted as a replica of the trucks involved in a recent slavery operation, accompanied by displays on the history and evolution of slavery in the U.S. southeast. The purpose of the Museum is to explain the phenomenon of modern-day slavery, why it exists and what we can do to end it. The museum has toured the north and southeast United States and its information can be downloaded online.