

# PictSweet Mushroom Workers Ask for Support of Mid-South Religious Leaders



Mushroom workers at the PictSweet company who work in Ventura, California have asked for the support of the Mid-South faith community in receiving a fair contract from the company. PictSweet's national headquarters are in Bells, Tennessee, so the treatment of the mushroom workers is also a matter of local concern.

On August 21st, board members and supporters of the Mid-South Interfaith Network for Economic Justice met with PictSweet worker Ascension Morales and United Farm Workers (UFW) organizer Brendan Greene via phone to discuss the situation of the

PictSweet workers.

Workers' most pressing concern is the need for an adequate, affordable medical plan. The current medical plan requires workers to pay for their prescriptions up front, with reimbursements often taking months to arrive. The most common illnesses workers have are not covered by the medical plan, making it effectively useless for many of them.

Respect from supervisors is also a key issue for many of the workers. Mr. Morales shared that when he began working at the company, he and his co-workers talked to a supervisor about unreasonable production demands that were being made on them. In response, "I was told that 'you came here from Mexico to obey me,'" said Mr. Morales.

Other issues in negotiation with the company are the need for a pension plan; a fair wage increase; safer working conditions; and an end to intimidation of workers who support the UFW.

The PictSweet workers had been among the first workers in California to be represented by Cesar Chavez and the UFW during the 1970s. However, when PictSweet took over the mushroom farm in 1987, it refused to recognize the union by negotiating a contract.

In December of 1999, PictSweet workers presented

management in California with a petition signed by over two-thirds of the workers, demanding that the company negotiate in good faith.

PictSweet workers have asked the Mid-South Interfaith Network to do what we can here in West Tennessee to bring this long labor dispute to a just resolution. In response, we wrote a letter to PictSweet CEO James Tankersley to request a meeting between Mid-South religious leaders and PictSweet officials to share our concerns and hear PictSweet's understanding of the situation in California. PictSweet has recently informed us that they are unwilling to meet with any religious leaders to discuss the subject.

In response, the Mid-South Interfaith Network is still planning to take a delegation to Bells to make one final attempt at meeting with PictSweet, and to conduct a prayer vigil outside company headquarters if PictSweet refuses to meet with the delegation. If you are interested in participating in the delegation to Bells, or in possible future activities in Memphis to support PictSweet workers, please contact Rebekah Jordan at (901) 332-3570 or [msinterfaith@yahoo.com](mailto:msinterfaith@yahoo.com).

## Recommended Reading

If you want to know more about the history of worker struggles here in Memphis, *Black Workers Remember* by Michael Keith Honey is an excellent resource.

Honey's book allows African-American workers to share, in their own words, their accounts of the sanitation workers strike, the struggle to establish a union at the huge Firestone plant (now closed), a powerful strike at the Memphis Furniture Company, and many other important events in Memphis labor history.