

The History and Evolution of Forced Labor in Florida Agriculture

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Coalition of Immokalee Workers

Since 1997, federal officials have successfully prosecuted seven farm-labor servitude operations in Florida involving well over one thousand workers. Modern-day slavery in Florida agriculture cannot be understood in a vacuum. It is not separate from the past; rather, its roots extend deep in the state's history. While the phenomenon of forced labor has taken many forms over the past four centuries in Florida agriculture, the industry has never been entirely free of the scourge of slavery. Though the extent of slavery in Florida agriculture has diminished over the centuries, one thing has remained constant: farm workers have always been, and remain today, the state's poorest, least powerful workers. If we are to abolish slavery once and for all in Florida agriculture, we must pull it up from the roots by addressing farm-worker poverty and powerlessness.

On November 20, 2007, three men described to Collier County sheriffs their chilling escape from a tomato-harvesting slavery ring based in Immokalee, Florida. Located on the edge of the Everglades and forty miles inland from the Gulf of Mexico, Immokalee is the epicenter of Florida's \$620 million tomato industry—an industry that employs some 30,000 workers, cultivates some 30,000 acres, and is responsible for virtually all fresh-field tomatoes grown in the United States between October and May (FTC 2010). The workers had punched and kicked their way out of a padlocked, 28-foot-long box truck two days earlier. Meanwhile, a second group of escapees sought help at the office of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) five blocks away from the site of

their captivity. They had learned of the grassroots farm-worker organization by way of Radio Conciencia, its low-power FM station that broadcasts music, news, and community programming in Spanish, Haitian Creole, and several Mayan languages. Unbeknownst to the workers, that same organization was spearheading a multifaceted effort to eliminate modern-day agricultural slavery in Florida and beyond.

Grim details of the case soon surfaced. Some of the fifteen workers had been held captive for more than two and a half years by crew leaders and brothers César and Giovanni Navarrete (Batista 2007). The workers had at times been locked and chained inside the truck, forced to urinate and defecate in its corners, and charged five dollars apiece to bathe outdoors with a garden hose. Held against their will, they received vicious beatings when they were unable or unwilling to work or when they attempted to flee.¹ The enslaved crew harvested on some of the nation's largest tomato farms. It was, in the words of U.S. Attorney Doug Molloy, one of southwest Florida's "biggest, ugliest slavery cases ever" (Bennet Williams 2008). The day the brothers received twelve-year federal prison sentences in a Fort Myers courthouse, Molloy emphasized the systemic nature of forced labor in Florida agriculture, noting, "We have a number of similar—and ongoing—investigations" (Bennet Williams 2008). The case became the seventh farm-labor servitude operation to be successfully prosecuted in Florida since 1997, involving well over one thousand workers and fifteen employers in total. As early as 2003, the scope of the problem prompted one Justice Department official to describe Florida—the nation's second-leading producer of fresh fruits and vegetables—as "ground zero for modern slavery" (Bowe 2003, 107–08). Since the Navarretes, indictments of two more servitude operations in Florida agriculture have been unsealed in federal court.²

A Continuum of Exploitation

The CIW's efforts at investigating, uncovering, and assisting in the prosecution of many of these operations has helped catalyze greater public attention and governmental action around the issue of modern-day slavery, most notably including the passage of the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000, the first anti-slavery legislation in the country since Reconstruction (Bowe 2007; CdeBaca 2010; Cockburn 2003). By necessity, combating forced labor figures prominently into the CIW's worker education and outreach, law enforcement trainings, and

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corporate supply-chain accountability campaigns. The approach is guided by an analysis of unequal power relations within the agriculture industry and the principle that "the most effective weapon against forced labor is an aware worker community engaged in the defense of its own labor rights" (CIW 2010). Within this framework, slavery does not take place in a vacuum but rather occurs

along a continuum of labor-rights violations in Florida's fields.³ During a fact-finding trip to Immokalee three years ago, Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont efficiently summarized the situation: "The norm is a disaster, and the extreme is slavery" (Vanden Heuvel 2008).

The disastrous norms to which Sanders refers have been faithfully documented over the past half century in countless exposés, white papers, congressional hearings, and lawsuits. They include farm workers' subpoverty annual earnings, wage theft, precarious terms of employment, substandard living conditions, systemic racial discrimination and sexual harassment, exclusion from basic labor rights (including collective bargaining and overtime pay), lax enforcement of existing workplace protections, inadequate access to health care and social safety-net programs, and occupational hazards such as routine exposure to pesticides and dangerous weather.⁴ While agricultural workers confront these challenges throughout the United States, conditions in the Southeast are often considered the worst by many farm workers and analysts (Bauer 2008; Thompson and Wiggins 2002). At a more fundamental level, the asymmetrical relationships of power between itinerant stoop laborers and the heavily capitalized, multinational growers that dominate fresh fruit and vegetable production continue to deepen, particularly as land ownership and the agrifood industry as a whole become ever more consolidated (Rothenberg 2000).

Taking a longer view, the retrograde conditions under which today's farm workers labor emerge as the vestiges of historical slavery in Florida's fields, and those same conditions are what enable modern-day slavery to continue to thrive. Building on this insight, the CIW recently launched its Florida Modern-Day Slavery Museum, a mobile exhibit that consists of a box truck outfitted as a replica of the trucks involved in the Navarrete operation and accompanied by displays on the history and evolution of slavery in the state. The museum was developed in consultation with workers who escaped from forced labor operations as well as leading academic authorities on slavery and labor history in Florida. It has toured schools, community centers, and places of worship from Miami to Boston and has been hosted at the U.S. State Department building and the National Mall in Washington, DC.⁵ The museum has also received a number of high-profile visitors, including President Jimmy Carter and Secretary of Labor Hilda Solis.

In alignment with this grassroots activist scholarship project, our article further chronicles the deep historical roots of modern-day slavery in Florida agriculture. While the phenomenon of forced labor has taken many forms over the past four centuries, Florida agriculture has never been entirely free of the scourge of slavery. Though the extent of slavery in the industry has diminished over the centuries, one thing has remained constant: farm workers have always been, and remain today, the state's poorest, least powerful workers. Therefore, if we are to

eliminate slavery once and for all in Florida's fields, we must pull it up from the roots by addressing farm-worker poverty and powerlessness.

Slavery from the Colonial Period to the Civil War

Over the first two centuries of Spanish presence in La Florida, from 1565 to 1763, slavery existed in both law and custom, yet relatively few enslaved Africans were imported. Moreover, evidence suggests that some Africans and their descendants were able to leverage Spanish juridical and religious traditions, chronic labor shortages, and geopolitical disquiet into citizenship and property rights.⁶ Enslaved blacks also enjoyed legal and social protections that were simply nonstarters under the British slave system directly to the north (Landers 1999). In terms of agriculture, authorities in St. Augustine relied on a *cacique* labor draft whereby young indigenous men planted and harvested corn essential for the colony's survival (Spike 2009). Far beyond this exploitation, however, contact with the Spaniards was disastrous for indigenous communities as waves of epidemics resulted in a catastrophic death toll and the rapid depopulation of the interior of the peninsula.⁷

By the 1730s, as imperial competition for the Southeast heightened, the wilderness of Spanish Florida became a refuge for blacks and native groups fleeing bondage and displacement on the British side of the territory's international border. When Great Britain gained control of Florida in 1763, emigrant planters from Georgia and the Carolinas sought to close the escape valve for runaway slaves and began developing large-scale commercial agriculture along the banks of the St. Johns River. Within twenty years, East Florida had been incorporated into the British "rice coast" that spanned to Cape Fear in North Carolina. Under harsher slave codes, bonded Africans and their descendants were brought to Florida to provide the necessary labor for the white settlers' vast new estates of indigo, rice, and sugar (Rivers 2000).

Spain briefly regained control of Florida following the American Revolution, but the inertia was too great—and the Anglo incursions too many—for Spain to maintain control for long. Florida was a U.S. territory in all but name by 1800. The United States formally acquired it in 1821, hastening the transformation of the area's political economy and labor conditions as the new territorial government codified white supremacy, chattel slavery, and Indian removal. Free blacks were pressured by hostile white settlers to sell their property at below-market value to white settlers, and more than a few emigrated to Cuba, Mexico, and Haiti in search of more hospitable surroundings. Meanwhile, Florida's first governor, General Andrew Jackson, placed a high priority on eliminating the perceived threat to the plantation frontier posed by autonomous black and native communities living within the untamed peninsula. The Second Seminole War of 1835 to 1842—the costliest "Indian War" in U.S.

history—largely succeeded in pacifying this resistance and in turn secured Florida for the expansion of Southern-style slavery (Landers 1999; Weisman 2009).

In the decades leading up to the Civil War, slaveholders drove ever larger numbers of bonded black laborers to Florida to fuel agricultural production in “Middle Florida,” the fertile swath of land between the Apalachicola and Suwanee Rivers.⁸ At its peak, this plantation belt, which included the capital in Tallahassee, was producing 85 percent of the state’s cotton, the new staple crop of preference (Rivers 2000, 17). By 1860, slavery clearly formed the backbone of the state’s economy. Florida’s total population was slightly over 140,000, nearly 44 percent of whom were enslaved African Americans; there were fewer than 1,000 free African Americans in the state at the onset of the Civil War.⁹

For slaves, agricultural working conditions in Florida were beyond brutal. Under extreme heat and humidity, they first toiled to clear thick pine and oak forests and then to plant, tend, and harvest cotton for the global market. Many planters sought to maximize their gains by extracting greater speeds of labor from their bonded workers, demanding ever longer hours in the fields, and constantly increasing minimum production requirements. This “pushing” required a more monotonous, regimented system of gang labor (as opposed to more flexible forms of task labor), and new methods of torture compelled workers’ compliance. Many workers who had been brought to Florida viewed this system as different in both degree and kind from their previous experiences with slavery in Virginia and the Carolinas. In Florida, as slavery historian Edward Baptist notes, these workers confronted “slavery, reloaded” (2009, 43).

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Legal and Extralegal Servitude after the Civil War

The Thirteenth Amendment abolished the legal institution of slavery in 1865. As Middle Florida’s plantation economy lay in tatters, a bloody struggle erupted over the control of free black labor. Abiding by the principle that “the colored man . . . [has] no rights that white men . . . [are] bound to respect,” planters organized a campaign of unprecedented violence to keep blacks as close to slavery as possible (Newton 2001, 16; Tolnay and Beck 1995). At least 153 African Americans were killed in Jackson County alone between 1868 and 1871 (Ortiz 2005, 24). Tensions were less dramatically manifested in countless daily disputes over working conditions between freedmen and plantation owners. As historian Jacqueline Jones argues, “These highly charged, violent conflicts stemmed from a single, central problem of labor management faced by all staple-crop employers in the postwar period—*how to maintain a labor force that would prove reliable at certain times of the year but not burdensome on a year-round basis*” (1992, 16, emphasis added). Indeed, this very

question would shape farm-labor employment practices well into the twenty-first century. For the time being, planters came to rely on arrangements such as waged day labor, sharecropping, and lease tenancy to keep blacks on the farm, where they allegedly belonged.

A tradition of lynching was developed in Florida to terrorize the black community and reinforce assaults on their newly gained citizenship, property, and labor rights. Between 1882 and 1930, black Floridians suffered the highest per capita lynching rate in the United States, with at least 266 killings, a rate twice that of Mississippi, Louisiana, and Georgia, and three times that of Alabama (Ortiz 2005, 61; Miller 2000, 16). This violence fortified white solidarity across class lines and laid the groundwork for the anti-black and anti-labor repression that made Florida infamous well into the twentieth century.¹⁰ Despite sustained resistance by African Americans, even in the face of extreme violence, the movement toward black electoral disenfranchisement and racial segregation made substantial gains in the 1880s and 1890s, and "Jim Crow" laws structured political, economic, and social life in Florida by the turn of the twentieth century. Large Florida-based agricultural and industrial interests were aided by northern investors who were themselves lured by the comparative advantage of a controlled, low-wage workforce.

While free black workers found themselves relegated to the state's lowest-paying and most undesirable jobs, outright forced labor persisted in a combination of de facto and legally sanctioned forms. One type of state-sanctioned forced labor set in motion after the Civil War was the convict-lease system. Given the absence of a state penitentiary, counties and the state leased predominantly African American men—often arrested on flimsy vagrancy charges—to on-site labor camps managed by farms, phosphate mines, and forest industry firms in north and central Florida.¹¹ In essence, the practice created a "new forced labor system that was wholly compatible with a particular vision of economic development and the continuation of racial domination—a form of 'modernization' acceptable to planter and industrialist alike" (Lichtenstein 1994, 10). The system was far-reaching into the daily lives of African Americans, in large part due to the rise of restrictive "black codes" as a method of postwar labor control. In the most comprehensive study of Florida's lease system, Vivien Miller (2000) calculates that more than 11,000 people were convicted of crimes by the state of Florida and sentenced to privately run labor camps from 1889 to 1918.

Life in the camps was dismal. Often located in isolated backwoods, camp perimeters were patrolled at night by armed guards, and it was not uncommon to discipline inmates with whipping and other forms of corporal punishment reminiscent of slavery.¹² Mortality rates were high as disposable convicts toiled under hidden and virtually unregulated conditions. As one Southern planter notoriously remarked in 1883, "Before

the war, we owned the negroes. If a man had a good nigger, he could afford to take care of him. . . . But these convicts: we don't own 'em. One dies, get another" (Mancini 1996, 3). At a phosphate mine in Citrus County, this sentiment was on clear display as over eighty prisoners died in 1899 alone. The body count, excessive even by the era's standards, prompted a federal investigation that found "a system of cruelty and inhumanity . . . that it would be hard to realize unless it could be seen and heard direct" (Mancini 1996, 191).

The effects of convict leasing were felt far beyond the camp gate. For example, the lease system held down agricultural and industrial wages for free workers—black and white—who had to compete on the same labor market with their incarcerated counterparts in a hopeless race to the bottom. In 1919, after mounting public outcry, Florida abolished its state lease, and in 1923, Florida and Alabama (the last holdouts in the nation) abolished their county leases. Florida then implemented two alternatives to convict leasing: so-called "chain gang" road crews and the state penal farm. As Miller explains, "Farm work was touted by political leaders, penal experts, and prison reformers as a truly progressive approach, *especially for black prisoners*, where stress was placed on acquiring skills . . . that would lead to employment on release" (2000, 45, emphasis added). As one commissioner on the Board of State Institutions remarked at the time, "Men will always be needed on the farm" (Miller 2000, 45). Although less brutal than their predecessor, the new chain gangs and state prison farm both revealed and reinforced white Floridians' deeply held beliefs about criminality, race, and labor.

Debt peonage was the other predominant form of forced labor that developed after the Civil War. This form of servitude took root wherever employers were unable to recruit free laborers—that is, in the state's most undesirable and lowest-paid workplaces. New lien and contract labor laws gave legal sanction to the employment arrangements that developed in the postbellum era and made it difficult, if not impossible, for workers to escape their terms, no matter how unfavorable those terms were. Even worse, debt peonage could merge with the convict-lease system in two ways. First, contract violations were criminal, not civil, matters. Second, while serving a sentence in a labor camp, a person might become indebted to that same employer through purchases made at the camp commissary (often for necessities), thus extending the length of the sentence until the debt was repaid in full (Shofner 1981a). For many workers, it was a truly vicious cycle.

While debt peonage was quietly practiced in the turpentine industry until the 1950s, it was most commonly associated with turn-of-the-century cotton sharecropping in northern Florida.¹³ This contract labor arrangement, coupled with steadily falling commodity crop prices, locked many blacks and poor whites alike into permanent debt and deplorable living conditions (Ouzts 1996). While tenancy provided self-sufficiency for some African Americans—namely those who were able to save

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enough money to eventually purchase their own land—prospects were bleak for the majority. The thin line between grinding poverty and servitude was often crossed through formal and informal restrictions placed on workers' freedom of mobility. Specific data for Florida are unknown, yet it is estimated that as many as one-third of all tenant farmers in Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi were being held against their will in 1900 (Jones 1992, 107). Peonage had, as historian Pete Daniel argues, "infected the South like a cancer, eating away at the economic freedom of blacks . . . and preserving the class structure inherited from slavery days" (1990, 11).

Atlantic Coast Migrant Farm Labor and Debt Peonage

As the nineteenth century drew to a close, mid-Atlantic truck farmers began to sell greater quantities of fresh fruits and vegetables to nearby, rapidly growing urban markets. This production model, known as "truck farming," spread southward with the aid of rail lines and refrigeration technology, and in the 1920s, grower-shippers began draining large tracts of the Everglades and expanding citrus, sugar cane, and winter vegetable production in central and south Florida. These vertically integrated, plantation-scale operations required a new and distinctly precarious workforce: one that would arrive just prior to the labor-intensive harvest and leave immediately upon its completion. Growers could attract a stable workforce by paying wages high enough to offset inevitable periods of underemployment, or they could recruit a destitute and desperate workforce who had few other options for survival.

Soon enough, these modern agricultural firms found their desperate workers fleeing from the imploding cotton sharecropping economy in northern Florida and Georgia. With a steady supply of low-wage labor, Florida's winter vegetable industry expanded, and after the World War I, these seasonal workers—and their labor contractors, known as crew leaders—began to piece together an annual migration circuit by following the seasons and harvesting crops along the eastern seaboard. Though the legal structures of chattel slavery and the convict lease were no longer in place, the racial assumptions of planters that undergirded these practices remained largely undiminished and were translated into the new labor regime (Shofner 1981b). In her detailed analysis of the making of Atlantic Coast migrant poverty, Cindy Hahamovitch writes:

The buying and selling of [migrant] labor was thus intimately bound up with notions of race. White planters in the South frequently expressed the belief that black people worked less the more they were paid. This "planters' theory of value" was all the more powerful (and long lived) because it combined their

belief in the “natural” inferiority of African Americans with “natural” laws of economics. Any increase in wages seemed unnatural—proof of a world turned upside down. (1997, 82)

These assumptions were legally codified when farm workers were excluded from New Deal-era, federal workplace protections, including the right to collective bargaining, thus structurally ensuring farm-worker powerlessness in relation to their employers for decades to come.¹⁴ The Florida agriculture industry made the most of these exclusions and remained deeply—sometimes violently—hostile to unionism.¹⁵ In a striking echo of earlier sentiments toward convict laborers, one Southern grower bluntly remarked in the 1960 CBS television report *Harvest of Shame*, “We used to own our slaves. Now we just rent them.”

Unsurprisingly, forced labor took root in this climate, as well. In 1942, the U.S. Sugar Corporation and four of its managers were indicted on federal peonage charges for holding sugar-cane workers against their will deep within the Everglades. Armed supervisors threatened to shoot farm workers, some of whom attempted to escape by swimming through canals, stowing aboard company trains, and crossing cane fields on foot under the cover of night (Shofner 1981b). These coercive labor practices went unmentioned in the company’s 1944 public relations pamphlet, *Everglades: The Agro-Industrial Empire of the South*. Instead, the company boasted, “On both sides of the highway west from Belle Glade can be seen the South Bay Plantation of the United States Sugar Corporation, with its neat, orderly, and well-maintained cottages of the happy, contented plantation workers” (Wilkinson 1989, 30).

Similar farm-worker servitude cases were prosecuted in Florida and other southeastern states through the 1980s (Bales and Soodalter 2009; Bove 2007; Rothenberg 2000). The predominant form of forced labor during this era was debt peonage, with debt incurred through charges for rent, transportation, food, wine, beer, and cigarettes provided by the crew leader at exorbitant prices through a “company store” arrangement. Workers were forced to purchase these items from the employer, and deductions at the end of the week regularly exceeded pay, leaving entire crews of workers in a spiraling system of debt from which they could not escape. Though now somewhat less common, this system persists, as evidenced by the recent convictions in the cases of *U.S. v. Evans* and *U.S. v. Lee*, discussed below.

In the last decades of the twentieth century, the demographics of the Atlantic Coast migrant workforce changed considerably. The internationalization of the farm labor market was set in motion by the U.S. government’s decision, at the behest of growers, to import West Indian “guestworkers” during World War II.¹⁶ Furthermore, in the 1970s, African American workers started to leave the fields en masse due in part to new occupational opportunities opened up by the achievements of the civil rights movement. This took place at roughly the same time

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that substantial numbers of immigrants—first from Mexico, and later Haiti and Guatemala—began to arrive in Florida, often fleeing collapsing rural economies and political violence (Hershberg and Rosen 2006; López 2007). Since 1987, more Latin American immigrants than African Americans have worked in Atlantic Coast agriculture, resulting in a "strategically diversified labor force" that allows farm employers to reinforce markers of ethnic and racial difference as a method of labor control (Hahamovitch 1997; Holt and Mattern 2002). Exclusion from the political process further marginalizes today's immigrant farm workers as it did African American workers until the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

Slavery in the Twenty-first Century

Today the Florida agricultural industry remains mired in a human-rights crisis made possible by the continuing poverty and powerlessness of farm workers. Since 1997, the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) has successfully prosecuted seven farm-labor servitude operations in Florida. These cases meet the high standard of proof and definition of slavery under federal laws, including laws forbidding peonage and indentured servitude passed just after the Civil War during Reconstruction (18 U.S.C. Sections 1581–1589) and the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act (2000). In such situations, captive workers are held against their will by their employers through threats and, all too often, the actual use of violence—including beatings, shootings, and pistol-whippings. These operations span workers' legal statuses and have involved undocumented immigrants, permanent residents, guest workers, and U.S.-born citizens alike:

- *U.S. v. Flores.* In 1997, Miguel Flores and Sebastian Gomez were sentenced to fifteen years each in federal prison on slavery, extortion, and firearms charges, amongst others. Flores and Gomez had a workforce of over four hundred men and women in Florida and South Carolina, harvesting vegetables and citrus. The workers, mostly indigenous Mexicans and Guatemalans, were forced to work ten-through twelve-hour days, six days per week, for as little as twenty dollars per week, under the watch of armed guards. Those who attempted escape were assaulted, pistol-whipped, and even shot. The case was brought to federal authorities after five years of investigation by escaped workers and members of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers.
- *U.S. v. Cuello.* In 1999, Abel Cuello was sentenced to thirty-three months in federal prison on slavery charges. He had held more than thirty tomato pickers in two trailers in the

isolated swampland west of Immokalee, keeping them under constant watch. Three workers escaped the camp, only to have their boss track them down a few weeks later. The employer ran one of them down with his car, stating that he owned them. The workers sought help from the CIW and the police, and the CIW worked with the DOJ on the ensuing investigation. Cuello worked for Manley Farms North Inc., a major Bonita Springs tomato supplier. Once out of prison, Cuello easily resumed his chosen profession, supplying labor to Ag-Mart Farms, a tomato company operating in Florida and North Carolina.

- ***U.S. v. Tecum.*** In 2001, Jose Tecum was sentenced to nine years in federal prison on slavery and kidnapping charges. He forced a young woman to work against her will both in the tomato fields around Immokalee, and in his home. The CIW assisted the DOJ with the prosecution, including victim and witness assistance.
- ***U.S. v. Lee.*** In 2001, Michael Lee was sentenced to four years in federal prison and three years supervised release on a slavery conspiracy charge. He pled guilty to using crack cocaine, threats, and violence to enslave his workers. Lee held his workers in forced labor, recruiting homeless U.S. citizens for his operation, creating a debt through loans for rent, food, cigarettes, and cocaine. He abducted and beat one of his workers to prevent him from leaving his employ. Lee harvested for orange growers in the Fort Pierce, Florida area. Florida Rural Legal Services in Immokalee referred the case to the DOJ.
- ***U.S. v. Ramos.*** In 2004, Ramiro and Juan Ramos were sentenced to fifteen years each in federal prison on slavery and firearms charges, and forced to forfeit over three million dollars in assets. The men, who had a workforce of more than 700 farm workers in the citrus groves of Florida, as well as the fields of North Carolina, threatened workers with death if they were to try to leave, and pistol-whipped and assaulted—at gunpoint—passenger van service drivers who gave rides to farm workers leaving the area. The case was brought to trial by the DOJ after two years of investigation by the CIW. The Ramoses harvested for Consolidated Citrus and Lykes Brothers, among others.
- ***U.S. v. Ronald Evans.*** In 2007, Florida employer Ron Evans was sentenced to thirty years in federal prison on drug conspiracy, financial restructuring, and witness tampering charges, among others. Jequita Evans was also sentenced to twenty years, and Ron Evans, Jr. to ten years. Operating in Florida and North Carolina, Ron Evans recruited homeless U.S. citizens from shelters across the Southeast, including New Orleans, Tampa, and Miami, with promises of good jobs and housing. At labor camps in the areas of Palatka, Florida, and Newton Grove, North Carolina, the Evans's deducted rent, food, crack cocaine,

and alcohol from workers' pay, holding them perpetually indebted in what the DOJ called "a form of servitude morally and legally reprehensible" (Pendency 2010). The Palatka labor camp was surrounded by a chain-link fence topped with barbed wire, with a "No Trespassing" sign. The CIW and a Miami-based homeless outreach organization, Touching Miami with Love, began the investigation and reported the case to federal authorities in 2003. In Florida, Ron Evans worked for grower Frank Johns. Johns was 2004 chairman of the Florida Fruit and Vegetable Association, the powerful lobbying arm of the Florida agricultural industry.

- *U.S. v. Navarrete*. In December 2008, employers Cesar and Geovanni Navarrete were sentenced to twelve years each in federal prison on charges of conspiracy and of holding workers in involuntary servitude, as described above. The CIW collaborated with the DOJ and the police on the year-long investigation and prosecution.

Forging a Solution to Modern-day Slavery

The Coalition of Immokalee Workers has been a leader of antislavery efforts in the state's agricultural industry for the past decade and played a key role in the discovery and investigation of six of the seven successful slavery prosecutions in Florida since 1997. However, the worker organization goes beyond partnering with federal civil rights authorities to bring slavery operations to justice after the fact. In 2001, the CIW launched the Campaign for Fair Food, an innovative, worker-

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led campaign to eliminate human-rights violations in the U.S. agricultural industry. The campaign identifies the links between the brutal farm-labor conditions in the fields and the retail food giants that buy the produce grown in those fields. The high degree

of consolidation in the food industry today means that multi-billion dollar brands on the retail end of the industry not only profit from farm-worker exploitation, but actually play an active role in that exploitation by leveraging their volume-purchasing power to demand ever-lower produce prices. With steadily rising input costs on the one hand and falling prices at the farm gate on the other, "growers pass on the costs and risks imposed on them to those on the lowest rung of the supply chain: the farm workers they employ" (Oxfam America 2004, 36). The Campaign for Fair Food seeks to reverse that process by enlisting the resources of retail food giants to improve farm-worker wages and harnessing their demand to reward growers who respect their workers' rights. Through its "Fair Food" agreements, the CIW is raising the tomato-harvesting wage floor, establishing a voice for farm workers in the agricultural industry, and enforcing the first-ever market consequences for growers that use forced labor.¹⁷

In March 2005, the CIW established the critical precedent of corporate accountability with regard to farm-worker wages and working conditions in the fast-food industry through its victory in the four-year Taco Bell Boycott. In April 2007, the gains of the Taco Bell (and parent company Yum Brands) agreement were reinforced and magnified by an agreement with McDonald's that, beyond meeting the terms of the Taco Bell agreement, introduced the concept of an eventual industry-wide code of conduct and third-party monitoring system designed by and for farm workers. In May 2008, after a U.S. Senate hearing on Florida farm labor abuses, the CIW won another agreement, this time with Burger King. In September 2008, the Campaign moved beyond the fast-food industry with its first agreement with a supermarket chain, Whole Foods Market. Then in December 2008, the CIW reached an agreement with the largest fast-food purchaser of tomatoes, Subway Restaurants. Most recently, the Campaign for Fair Food broke into the world of food-service providers by signing agreements with Compass Group, Aramark, Sodexo, and Bon Appetit Management Company.

In late 2010, after fifteen years of tireless organizing, the CIW reached groundbreaking agreements to extend its "Fair Food" principles to farms representing more than 90 percent of Florida's tomato industry. These direct agreements with the growers stand to usher in a new era of agricultural labor relations—born of a union of human-rights principles and corporate accountability strategies—unlike anything previously experienced in Florida or anywhere along the east coast of the United States. Lucas Benitez, a co-founder of the CIW, described the changes in a statement issued at the joint press conference announcing the new agreements:

The timing of today's announcement couldn't be more appropriate. Not only is Thanksgiving, our annual celebration of the harvest, just around the corner, but so is the 50th anniversary of the "Harvest of Shame," the landmark expose of 20th-century poverty and degradation in Florida's fields.

Today, 50 years later, hope, not shame, is on the horizon.

With that hope—and with the hard work and well-constructed plan of action included in this agreement—we will make the concrete changes that will allow us to relegate the Harvest of Shame once and for all to the annals of history and, together, build a stronger, more sustainable Florida tomato industry for the twenty-first century.

With this agreement, we will be educating workers, on the job, across the industry, about their rights under this code of conduct.

With this agreement, we will be working with growers to identify and eliminate abuses through a cooperative complaint investigation and resolution system, with real consequences for violations, including zero tolerance for forced labor.

With this agreement, workers across the industry will receive a long-awaited raise, through the penny per pound program. The raise will not change lives overnight. But it will grow with each new retail food company that seizes this historic op-

portunity, joins us in support of Fair Food, and does its part to help Florida farm workers receive the decent wage and dignified working conditions they deserve.

And with this agreement, farm workers will enjoy new rights in the fields, including new health and safety structures to ensure that their concerns are heard on the job, the right to shade to protect from the extremes of Florida's heat, and an end to the practice of mandatory overfilling of buckets, which has been a source of contention for years in the fields. (2010)

While the implementation of these new agreements is still in its infancy, it is already clear that farm workers themselves will be playing an active and important role in cleansing the industry of the very worst abuses—forced labor, debt peonage, large-scale wage theft, sexual harassment—that have plagued it since the emergence of the migrant labor system in the early twentieth century. In his own statement at the same press conference, Reggie Brown, executive vice president of the Florida Tomato Growers Exchange (FTGE), underscored the importance of working in partnership with the CIW to eliminate farm labor abuses for the industry's long-term prospects in a food market increasingly concerned with social accountability. "As we move forward, we can be certain that labor complaints will continue to arise in the foreseeable future, but it is how we deal with these complaints in this new partnership that will serve to demonstrate that we are serious and that our approach is working," Brown explained. He continued, "As time goes by, we are confident that we will be able to weed out the bad actors and, working together, build a stronger, more sustainable industry that will be better equipped than ever to thrive in an increasingly competitive market place" (2010).

In addition to these potentially transformative developments, the CIW has made considerable progress in raising the issue of slavery in the political realm. In March 2009, after meeting in Tallahassee with CIW members and slavery victims, Florida governor Charlie Crist wrote in an open letter to the CIW: "I have no tolerance for slavery in any form, and I am committed to eliminating this injustice anywhere in Florida. . . . I support the Coalition's Campaign for Fair Food, whereby corporate purchasers of tomatoes have agreed to contribute monies for the benefit of the tomato field workers." Governor Crist's endorsement of the Campaign for Fair Food was the first-ever endorsement by a sitting Florida governor of a farm-labor organizing campaign and as such sent a powerful message to the retail food industry leaders who had yet to support the "Fair Food" principles. In a similar vein, in June 2010, Laura Germino, coordinator of the CIW's Anti-Slavery Campaign, was honored—along with eight other international anti-slavery activists—by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton for her exemplary efforts in the fight against modern-day slavery. At the ceremony on the top floor of the State Department building (and with the Modern-day Slavery Museum exhibited outside), Clinton emphasized that "[fighting slavery] is everyone's responsibility. Busi-

nesses that knowingly profit or exhibit reckless disregard about their supply chains, governments that turn a blind eye or do not devote serious resources to addressing the problem, all of us have to speak out and act forcefully" (2010).

Today, though much progress has been made, much remains to be done. With the notable exception of Whole Foods Market, the \$500 billion supermarket industry has been slow to adopt the higher standards accepted by the fast-food and food-service industries and continues to turn a blind eye to the inhumane conditions in the fields where its tomatoes are grown.¹⁸ Still, despite the momentary resistance of the supermarkets and the monumental task of implementing its "Fair Food" agreements across the entire Florida tomato industry, the Campaign for Fair Food offers credible hope for significantly diminishing the prevalence and severity of forms of farm-labor exploitation set into motion centuries ago. Finally, in an era of deregulation and globalized supply chains, the corporate accountability model that the Campaign for Fair Food is exploring could have implications beyond Florida's fields. "This can and will be extended to other areas of the agricultural industry," argues Chris Tilly of the UCLA Institute for Research on Labor and Employment. He adds: "There are potentially interesting implications for supply chains that reach outside this country" (Ríos 2011). Indeed, time will tell.

Endnotes

1. For more details on the Navarrete case, see Estabrook 2009.

2. The problem of forced labor, of course, extends far beyond Florida's fields, implicating other sectors of the economy as well. The U.S. Department of State (2010) reports the incidence of forced labor in domestic servitude, manufacturing, janitorial services, and other jobs where wages are low, legal protections are weak, and monitoring of conditions is virtually nonexistent. (While sex trafficking often receives more attention from media and law enforcement, the State Department puts forth that more people are victimized each year by labor trafficking in the United States.) Estimates of the total number of slaves vary widely, and a reliable number is virtually impossible to determine due to the hidden nature of the crime. Restricting our focus once again to the agricultural sector, the CIW estimated in 2003 that up to 10 percent of the U.S. farm labor force was enslaved (Cockburn 2003). Many operations evade detection, much less prosecution. As one Department of Labor spokesperson commented, "These cases take a lot of resources to get the evidence needed to try perpetrators. And when we do have a criminal case, we lose an investigator for a long period of time" (Free the Slaves 2004). While Florida may be "ground zero" for this type of abuse, cases investigated by the CIW have also had aspects involving North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Virginia. Nor is the problem limited to the Southeast. In 2002, the Department of Justice indicted six defendants in a farm-labor slavery operation in western New York. In 2009, a *New York Times* exposé publicized conditions of "indentured servitude" faced by immigrant shepherders in Colorado and Wyoming (Frosch 2009). In 2010, the Department of Justice unsealed an indictment of the largest forced labor case in U.S. history, involving more than four hundred

Thai workers brought to farms across the country—from California to Florida—under a federal guest worker program. Still, to employ a scientific metaphor, while a labor abuse-sensitive Geiger counter would likely detect traces of slavery throughout the country, it is reasonable to assume that the highest frequency of clicks would occur in the fields of the Sunshine State. See also Anti-Slavery International 2002; Bales and Soodalter 2009.

3. Anthropologist Denise Brennan (2010) has applied the CIW's "continuum of abuses" framework to her analysis of forced labor and the resettlement of formerly trafficked persons in the United States.

4. López (2007) documents that agricultural work is one of the most dangerous occupations in the United States, with a death rate almost six times higher than that of other industries. In 2002 alone, for example, there were 730 agricultural deaths and another 150,000 disabling injuries. Additionally, approximately 300,000 farm workers suffer pesticide poisoning annually through spray drift or working in recently sprayed fields, according to Environmental Protection Agency estimates. Long-term pesticide exposure has been conclusively linked to sterility, skin disease, neurological damage, and more than thirty types of cancer.

5. An earlier draft of portions of this article was self-published by the CIW as a research brief and accompanying booklet for the Florida Modern-Day Slavery Museum (http://www.ciw-online.org/freedom_march/MuseumBookletWeb.pdf). The reader may view the Florida Modern-Day Slavery Museum website, which includes a photo gallery of the museum as well as academic statements of support for the project, at <http://www.ciw-online.org/museum/>.

6. Sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1994) offer a useful theoretical framework for understanding *racial formation*, or, "the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed. . . . Racial formation is a process of historically situated *projects* in which human bodies and social structures are represented and organized" (55–56). Omi and Winant link racial formation to the evolution of *hegemony*, or the shifting balance between coercion and consent required to uphold a prevailing social order. This synthesis allows us to trace how hegemonic views of race become commonsense or "a way of comprehending, explaining, and acting in the world" and how these representations and structures vary over time and culture (60).

7. Demographer Peter Wood (1989) estimates that the native population in Florida fell from several hundred thousand to fewer than twenty thousand in less than two hundred years after first contact with Spaniards.

8. The unprecedented spatial expansion of slavery within the United States in the first half of the nineteenth century transformed the South into the fabled "Cotton Kingdom" that stretched from the Atlantic coast to east Texas. This growth strategy was underwritten by the relocation southward and westward of an estimated one million slaves. The inhumanity of this forced migration—the disruption of kinship and mutual support networks, the friends and lovers lost forever—underscored the omnipresent threat of social and physical death at the heart of American chattel slavery. The growth of the plantation system in Middle Florida was part and parcel of this epochal development and closely tied the state's dominant social, economic, and political ideologies to those of the so-called "Old South" (Baptist 2002; Johnson 1999).

9. Historical Census Browser. <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu> (accessed January 27, 2010).

10. High-profile repressive violence in twentieth-century Florida included the lynching of two union organizers in Tampa in 1910; massacres of black citizens in Rosewood and Ocoee in the 1920s; the spectacle lynching of Claude Neal in 1934; and the assassination of NAACP activist Harry Moore in 1951. For example, just two months before Moore's assassination, known Klansmen and president of the Mims Citrus Exchange told another NAACP member that Moore's "neck [was] out to be broken . . . [for] . . . putting notions in niggers' heads" (Newton 2001, 130). See also Ingalls 1988 and Gilmore 2008.

11. It is worth noting that Florida's convict-lease system was supervised by the state Department of Agriculture (Miller 2000). For a more general account of the convict-lease system, see Blackmon 2008.

12. For a first-hand account of the convict-lease system from the perspective of a camp captain, see Powell 1970. For a more general composite sketch of turpentine camp life, see Lauriault 1989.

13. Author, human rights activist, and long-time Florida resident Stetson Kennedy (1952) provided detailed testimony to the United Nations Commission on Forced Labor about conditions in the mid-twentieth-century Florida turpentine industry.

14. As Ruth Wilson Gilmore astutely notes: "The racial, industrial, gender, and regional divisions reflected in eligibility for and the scope of New Deal agencies and programs institutionalized Jim Crow without speaking his name" (2007, 79).

15. In 1952, for example, when organizations including the AFL-CIO and Methodist Women's Society of Christian Service lobbied Congress to extend National Labor Rights Act protections to farm workers, a member of a Florida growers' association declared that the proposal came from "theorists and persons who would lead this Nation down the road to state socialism." Another industry spokesperson found the legislation altogether unnecessary since Florida farm workers "weren't depressed as compared with the standards of living of most of the people of the world" (Grubbs 1961, 118–19). Pilloried by the agribusiness lobby, the bill suffered ignominious defeat. For more on anti-unionism in Florida agriculture, see Jamieson 1945 and Lichtenstein 2009.

16. For more on the history of the guest worker program in Florida agriculture, see Hahamovitch 1997. Of course, the guest worker program itself has been the subject of much controversy given its pervasive history of labor rights abuses, including cases of servitude (SPLC 2007).

17. The power of this model was demonstrated in 2009 following sentencing in the case of *U.S. vs. Navarrete*. For the first time ever, a federal slavery conviction led to direct market consequences for the growers whose tomatoes were picked by the enslaved workers, triggering the zero tolerance for slavery provisions in the CIW's agreements, which caused the growers to lose business.

18. Emblematic of this indifference has been the reaction of Florida's largest grocer (and the state's largest privately held company), Publix. When the CIW asked Publix to adopt the principles of the Campaign for Fair Food—principles, including a zero tolerance policy for slavery, designed to eliminate forced labor and its causes—Florida's largest supermarket chain turned its back.

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