



Coalition of Immokalee Workers

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Slavery in the Fields and the Food We Eat

In 21st century America, slavery remains woven into the fabric of our daily lives. On any given day, the tomatoes in the sandwiches we eat or the oranges in the juice we drink may have been picked by workers in involuntary servitude. Captive workers are held against their will by their employers through threats, and all too often the actual use of, violence.

The CIW helps fight this crime by uncovering, investigating, and assisting in the federal prosecution of slavery rings preying on hundreds of farmworkers. Through this work, the CIW has brought the abysmal state of human rights in U.S. agriculture today to public light.

The following is a list of known Florida farm labor slavery cases, 1997-2008:

U.S. vs. Flores -- In 1997, Miguel Flores and Sebastian Gomez were sentenced to 15 years each in federal prison on slavery, extortion, and firearms charges, amongst others. Flores and Gomez had a workforce of over 400 men and women in Florida and South Carolina, harvesting vegetables and citrus. The workers, mostly indigenous Mexicans and Guatemalans, were forced to work 10-12 hour days, 6 days per week, for as little as \$20 per week, under the constant 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 CIW members.

U.S. vs. Cuello -- In 1999, Abel Cuello was sentenced to 33 months in federal prison on slavery charges. He had held more than 30 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 Department of Justice (DOJ) on the ensuing investigation. Cuello worked for Manley Farms North Inc., a major Bonita Springs tomato supplier. Once out of prison, Cuello supplied labor to Ag-Mart Farms, a tomato company operating in Florida and North Carolina.

U.S. vs. Tecum - In 2001, Jose Tecum was sentenced to 9 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. vs. Lee - In 2001, Michael Lee was sentenced to 4 years in federal prison and 3 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 "company store" 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, FL area.

U.S. vs. Ramos - In 2004, Ramiro and Juan Ramos were sentenced to 15 years each in federal prison on slavery and firearms charges, and the forfeiture of over \$3 million in assets. The men, who had a workforce of over 700 farmworkers 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 farmworkers 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. vs. Ronald Evans -- In 2007, Florida employer Ron Evans was sentenced to 30 years in federal prison on drug conspiracy, financial re-structuring, and witness tampering charges, among others. Jequita Evans was also sentenced to 20 years, and Ron Evans Jr. to 10 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 Palatka, FL and Newton Grove, NC area labor camps, the Evans' 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." 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 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. As of 2007, he remained the Chairman of the FFVA's Budget and Finance Committee.

U.S. vs. Navarrete -- In December 2008, employers Cesar and Geovanni Navarrete were sentenced to 12 years each in federal prison on charges of conspiracy, holding workers in involuntary servitude, and peonage. They had employed dozens of tomato pickers in Florida and South Carolina. As stated in the DOJ press release on the farm bosses' conviction,

"[the employers]pled guilty to beating, threatening, restraining, and locking workers in trucks to force them to work as agricultural laborers. They were accused of paying the workers minimal wages and driving the workers into debt, while simultaneously threatening physical harm if the workers left their employment before their debts had been repaid to the Navarretes."

A 12/19/07 article in The Independent newspaper (UK) describes the conditions faced by the workers in more detail:

"Three Florida fruit-pickers, held captive and brutalised by their employer for more than a year, finally broke free of their bonds by punching their way through the ventilator hatch of the van in which they were imprisoned. Once outside, they dashed for freedom. When they found sanctuary one recent Sunday morning, all bore the marks of heavy beatings to the head and body. One of the pickers had a nasty, untreated knife wound on his arm. Police would learn later that another man had his hands chained behind his back every night to prevent him escaping, leaving his wrists swollen. The migrants were not only forced to work in sub-human conditions but mistreated and forced into debt. They were locked up at night and had to pay for sub-standard food. If they took a shower with a garden hose or bucket, it cost them \$5."

Workers first reported the abuse to Collier County police, and additional workers sought help from the CIW. The CIW collaborated with the Department of Justice and the police on the year-long investigation and prosecution.

It must be stated that these situations are *not* the norm in agriculture today. Rather, modern-day slavery occurs along a continuum of systemic abuse that can best be described as "sweatshop" conditions, including sub-poverty wages, no right to overtime pay, and no right to organize. The CIW believes that the ultimate solution to modern-day slavery in agribusiness lies on the "demand side" of the US produce market -- the major food-buying corporations that profit from the artificially-low cost of US produce picked by workers in sweatshop conditions which, in the worst cases, tip over into slavery. Ultimately, these corporations must leverage their vast resources and market influence as major produce buyers to clean up slavery and other labor abuses in their supply chains once and for all.

The CIW is a founding member of the national Freedom Network USA to Empower Victims of Slavery and Trafficking. As a regional coordinator for the Freedom Network Training Institute on Human Trafficking, we train state and federal law enforcement and social services personnel throughout the Southeastern US on how to recognize and assist enslaved people. The CIW's anti-slavery efforts have gained national and international recognition, including the 2003 Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Award, a 2005 letter of commendation from FBI Director Robert Mueller, and the 2007 Anti-Slavery Award by Anti-Slavery International of London. In June 2010, CIW's Anti-Slavery Campaign Coordinator Laura Germino was recognized as a Trafficking in Persons Hero by the U.S. Department of State -- the first time ever that the recognition was awarded to a resident of the United States.