



# Coalition of Immokalee Workers

**SLAVERY IN THE FIELDS AND THE FOOD WE EAT**

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In 21st century America, slavery remains woven into the fabric of our daily lives. On any given day, the fruit and vegetables we eat or drink may have been picked by workers in involuntary servitude. Men and women are held against their will by their employers through the use or threats of violence – including beatings, shootings, and pistol-whippings – and coercion.

The CIW's Anti-Slavery Program has uncovered, investigated, and assisted in the prosecution of numerous multi-state, multi-worker farm slavery operations across the Southeastern U.S., helping liberate over 1,200 workers held against their will. The U.S. Department of State credits the CIW with "pioneering" the worker-centered, multi-sectoral approach to prosecutions, and hails their work on some of the earliest cases as the "spark" that ignited today's anti-slavery movement.

## Select U.S. farm labor slavery prosecutions, 1997-2021:

**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 U.S. 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.

**U.S. vs. Ramos:** In 2004, Ramiro and Juan Ramos were sentenced to 15 years each in federal prison on slavery and firearms charges. The men, who had a workforce of over 700 farmworkers in the citrus groves of Florida and in the fields of North Carolina, threatened workers with death if they tried 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 CIW investigation. 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 restructuring, and witness tampering charges, among others. His wife 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 US citizens from shelters across the Southeast 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 prominent 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.” Workers first reported the abuse to Collier County police, and additional workers sought help from the CIW. The CIW collaborated with the DOJ and the police on the year-long investigation and prosecution.

**US vs. Global Horizons:** In September 2010, staff of guestworker recruiting giant Global Horizons were charged with operating a forced labor ring active in 13 states, including Florida. Global Horizons CEO Mordechai Orian and six others were accused of holding 600 guestworkers from Thailand against their will in what prosecutors called at the time “the largest human trafficking case in U.S. history.” FBI Special Agent Tom Simon described the case as “a classic bait-and-switch... They were telling the Thai workers one thing to lure them here. Then when they got here, their passports were taken away and they were held in forced servitude working in these farms.” Of the eight people originally indicted, three pled guilty; a Global Horizons manager pled guilty to conspiracy to violate the forced labor statute, and two field supervisors pled guilty to document servitude. A fourth defendant pled guilty in Thailand to recruitment fraud. In July 2012, the DOJ dropped the charges against CEO Orian and another Global Horizons executive.

**C&C Farms:** In February 2017, a Federal District Court Judge in Ft. Myers, Florida, ordered Reyes Tapia-Ortiz, a crewleader for Clewiston, FL-based C&C Farms, to pay \$3.5 million dollars in damages to five farmworkers from Mexico and Guatemala. The crewleader was sued for, among other things, having “engaged in forced labor and related offenses by brandishing a gun, threatening to harm and deport workers for complaining about conditions and not being paid for all their work at legal wages, sexually harassing a female worker, and falsely imprisoning then facilitating the deportation of a worker who stopped working for him.” C&C Agricultural Farms was also named in the suit, and a Naples Daily News story from 2014 described the charges against the farm and its director, Ernesto Ruben Cordero, at the time: “The lawsuit says Cordero threatened and yelled obscenities and racial slurs at them and other workers. Between January 2010 and May 2010, during work hours in C&C Farms’ fields, Cordero threatened that he could ‘kill a worker and simply leave the body in a ditch.’”

**US vs. Bladimir Moreno et al:** In September 2021, a Federal Grand Jury in Tampa charged three labor contractors with forced labor. According to the indictment, Moreno, Christina Gamez and Guadalupe Mendes Mendoza ran a labor contracting company (Los Villatoros Harvesting) for migrant workers with temporary agricultural visas from 2015 through 2017. Investigators said Los Villatoros

Harvesting subjected multiple Mexican agricultural workers employed in Florida, Kentucky, Indiana, Georgia and North Carolina to forced labor, coercing workers to complete hundreds of hours of physically demanding agricultural labor using threats of arrest, deportation, and physical harm, and by imposing debts, confiscating passports, and verbal abuse and isolation. As of March 2022, this case is still ongoing.

**US vs. Patricio TCO:** In late November 2021, the U.S. Department of Justice unsealed a 54-count indictment describing an investigation, dubbed Operation Blooming Onion, that led to 24 arrests and involved crimes against 71,000 farmworkers over six years. A spokesperson from the U.S. Attorney's Office told VICE News that the USAO "believes Operation Blooming Onion may be one of the country's largest-ever human trafficking and visa fraud investigations." The government press release described the unconscionable conditions workers were forced to endure, as well as the sophisticated money laundering operation alleged to have processed over \$200 million in illegal profits: "The conspirators are accused of raping, kidnapping and threatening or attempting to kill some of the workers or their families, and in many cases sold or traded the workers to other conspirators. At least two of the workers died as a result of workplace conditions." As of March 2022, this case is still ongoing.

For workers, the best cases are the ones that never happen, and launching the Fair Food Program (FFP) helped CIW reach its ultimate goal: prevention. Worker-to-worker education, independent monitoring, and enforceable zero tolerance policies for forced labor – all backed by the Program's binding agreements with Participating Buyers and real market consequences – have transformed workplaces once known to federal prosecutors as "ground zero for modern day slavery" into the best work environment in U.S. agriculture. On Fair Food Program farms, forced labor has been eliminated.

In fact, the only case in the Program's entire 10-year history, arose because one grower ignored an important FFP prevention mechanism and hired an ineligible supervisor. But in that case, unlike outside the Program, the FFP's detection, investigation and corrective action mechanisms all worked exactly as intended: workers called the FFSC hotline within days of the perpetrator's hire, investigators were on the ground within 24 hours, and in less than one month, the perpetrator was arrested and banned from employment on FFP farms. The grower that hired him was suspended from the Program, and the victims received immediate assistance and counseling.

The CIW's Anti-Slavery Program thus operates in two worlds. In the 'new world' of the Fair Food Program, prevention is the norm, and any unusual case is rapidly identified and eliminated. In the 'old world' outside the FFP, the CIW conducts stellar investigations of forced labor and assists with prosecutions. As the FFP expands, so too will the slavery-free zone. It is untenable, in the long run, for the two worlds to co-exist, as workers and consumers alike will not abide by it.

In a region and industry with a previously uninterrupted 300-year history of forced labor and abuse without effective remedy this is a truly remarkable contrast. Now present in several crops across eight U.S. states, the Fair Food Program has also begun to grow its global impact through the expansion of its underlying Worker-driven Social Responsibility (WSR) model. With current adaptations in the dairy industry in Vermont, apparel manufacturing in Bangladesh and Lesotho, and nascent programs in industries as diverse as construction, fishing, and entertainment, the WSR model provides a framework that empowers workers to be the frontline defenders of their own human rights and helps rid global supply chains of forced labor.