



NURI VALLBONA/HERALD STAFF

**BACK IN THE FIELDS:** Antonio Martinez heads for home after picking oranges. His case helped convict an abusive crew boss, who is now free again. Martinez is uneasy about disclosing his work site.

## Fear remains with picker once kept in servitude

BY RONNIE GREENE  
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The fear is still fresh for farmworker Antonio Martinez. After he was held as a slave in a squalid hovel, his case helped send his abusive crew boss to prison.

Today — four years later — Martinez is back in the fields, back in the Florida heat, plucking precious oranges. It is not an easy task.

A heavy orange-colored sack around his waist, Martinez navigates a ladder like a gymnast, leaning into the thick grove to snatch orange after orange. The ladder has two legs, not four. Martinez dangles from its top rungs, sometimes balancing on just one ladder leg.

He wears thick wool socks under his shirt, a rare sight in the Sunshine State. The socks protect workers from pesticides and bruises.

It takes 12 large orange sacks, each weighing about 90 pounds when full, to fill a nearby bin. For each bin he fills, Martinez pockets one *ficha*, or token, which brings \$8. On this

day, his first in this grove, Martinez goes easy.

Easy, for him, means filling the tub five times, which takes 60 sacks. That's 5,400 pounds of fruit for \$40 of pay in a day.

This is the grind of farmworkers, whether they reach for oranges or tomatoes, stoop for cabbage or stand assembly-line to sort potatoes.

"When we say the tomatoes that leave Immokalee have sweat, have blood, we're not exaggerating," said Lucas Benitez, co-founder of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, a non-profit group that rallies for farmworker rights and has helped bring crimes like the Abel Cuello Jr. case to the attention of authorities.

Cuello pleaded guilty to involuntary servitude against Martinez and other workers, and went away to prison for 33 months.

But Cuello is out now. Martinez has not forgotten. Although he continues to work the fields to make a living, he asked that his work site not be disclosed.

"Thankfully," Martinez said, "I was able to escape."

# Florida tops U.S. in number of problem farm labor bosses

BY RONNIE GREENE  
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Florida, America's citrus capital, is also America's capital for lawless and ruthless farm labor contractors.

The state is home to more than four of every 10 farm contractors currently barred from doing business for skirting migrant farmworker laws, The Herald found.

That's far more than in any other state. Florida is also home to the largest hub of these crew-boss contractors, more than one of every three nationwide.

Farmworker advocates say that Florida has so many crew leaders because the grower industry uses these bosses as a "buffer" between them and workers in their fields, shielding growers from liability. The agricultural industry disputes this, but some growers live in mansions while employing men who cheat, abuse or enslave workers.

These middleman contractors can live richly, too. While some scrape to get by, cheating the workers below them to make a flimsy profit, others earn handsome pay.

Last year, a Fort Pierce jury found that Lake Placid farm contractors Ramiro and Juan Ramos derived \$3 million in proceeds from their operation — supplying foreign workers to pick fruit for wealthy growers.

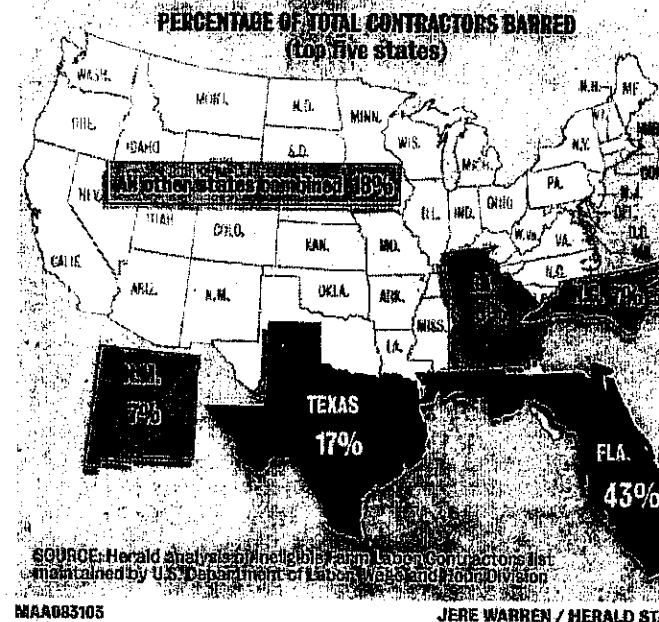
### 'ENORMOUS PROFITS'

"They made enormous profits by providing inexpensive labor to citrus growers," court papers say. The brothers were sent to prison for their crimes.

In Florida, abuse comes often. As of June, Florida had 214 of the 498 ineligible farm labor contractors and their

## NATIONAL COMPARISON

Florida leads the nation in the number of farm labor contractors and their assistants currently barred because of violations of the Migrant and Seasonal Agricultural Worker Protection Act.



assistants nationwide, or 43 percent. That's 2 1/2 times more than No. 2 Texas, which has a similar number of seasonal farmworkers.

### U.S. ENFORCEMENT

These crew bosses can be kicked out of the business for keeping workers in shabby housing, cheating them on pay, or otherwise skirting the federal Migrant and Seasonal Agricultural Worker Protection Act, which sets rules regarding pay, housing and transportation. The U.S. Department of Labor's Wage and Hour Division enforces this and other laws, but has seen its investigative staff dwindle in recent years.

Agency officials acknowledged that Florida is a hub for crew bosses, but could only speculate on why so many

problem contractors are based in the state. Prompted by The Herald's inquiry, federal officials said they would more closely examine why so many Florida contractors run afoul of the law.

"I guess the basic cause is greed, but there are other things at play," said John McKeon, acting regional administrator for Wage and Hour's Southeastern Region in Atlanta, which covers Florida.

Among the possible factors:

► Many crew chiefs are based in the Sunshine State, but move up and down the East Coast as farm seasons shift north. Thus, while Florida is home to the most farm contractors, some of their misdeeds may occur in other states.

► Florida state officials are more aggressive than most in notifying the agency when contractors fail to pay unemployment and federal income taxes, among the failings that can trigger debarment.

► Many Florida contractors not only hire workers to pick crops, but they provide housing and transportation. "It causes a possibility of more violations because there are more things they have to comply with," McKeon said.

### 'FEAR OF DETECTION'

But farmworkers — many here illegally, others desperate for cash — rarely speak up about the problems. "The workers' fear of detection is an enormous deterrent," said Lisa Butler, a lawyer with Florida Rural Legal Services Inc.

In the worst cases, crew chiefs seize on these vulnerabilities.

"If you take the 100 worst [contractors], you are really talking about some bad people who do some terrible things," said Rob Williams, director of the Migrant Farmworker Justice Project of Florida Legal Services in Tallahassee.

### 'HOPELESS' APPROACH

Yet some say that abuse will never stop if enforcement ends with the crew chiefs.

"An approach that focuses on them is hopeless," Williams said. "You take away their license and their brother gets a license or their wife gets a license or their kid gets a license. Or they operate without a license. The bad contractors move out the good contractors. The grower gives the job to the lowest bidder, and when something goes wrong, they point to the contractors."