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The Price of Tomatoes: Keeping Slavery Alive in Florida

If you have eaten a tomato this winter, chances are very good that it was picked by a person who lives in virtual slavery.

by Barry Estabrook

Driving from Naples, Florida, the nation's second-wealthiest metropolitan area, to Immokalee takes less than an hour on a straight road. You pass houses that sell for an average of \$1.4 million, shopping malls anchored by Tiffany's and Saks Fifth Avenue, manicured golf courses. Eventually, gated communities with names like Monaco Beach Club and Imperial Golf Estates give way to modest ranches, and the highway shrivels from six lanes to two. Through the scruffy palmettos, you glimpse flat, sandy tomato fields shimmering in the broiling sun. Rounding a long curve, you enter Immokalee. The heart of town is a nine-block grid of dusty, potholed streets lined by boarded-up bars and bodegas, peeling shacks, and sagging, mildew-streaked house trailers. Mongrel dogs snooze in the shade, scrawny chickens peck in yards. Just off the main drag, vultures squabble over roadkill. Immokalee's population is 70 percent Latino. Per capita income is only \$8,500 a year. One third of the families in this city of nearly 25,000 live below the poverty line. Over one third of the children drop out before graduating from high school.

Immokalee is the tomato capital of the United States. Between December and May, as much as 90 percent of the fresh domestic tomatoes we eat come from south Florida, and Immokalee is home to one of the area's largest communities of farmworkers. According to Douglas Molloy, the chief assistant U.S. attorney based in Fort Myers, Immokalee has another claim to fame: It is "ground zero for modern slavery."

The beige stucco house at 209 South Seventh Street is remarkable only because it is in better repair than most Immokalee dwellings. For two and a half years, beginning in April 2005, Mariano Lucas Domingo, along with several other men, was held as a slave at that address. At first, the deal must have seemed reasonable. Lucas, a Guatemalan in his thirties, had slipped across the border to make money to send home for the care of an ailing parent. He expected to earn about \$200 a week in the fields. Cesar Navarrete, then a 23-year-old illegal immigrant from Mexico, agreed to provide room and board at his family's home on South Seventh Street and extend credit to cover the periods when there were no tomatoes to pick.

Lucas's "room" turned out to be the back of a box truck in the junk-strewn yard, shared with two or three other workers. It lacked running water and a toilet, so occupants urinated and defecated in a corner. For that, Navarrete docked Lucas's pay by \$20 a week. According to court papers, he also charged Lucas for two meager meals a day: eggs, beans, rice, tortillas, and, occasionally, some sort of meat. Cold showers from a garden hose in the backyard were \$5 each. Everything had a price. Lucas was soon \$300 in debt. After a month of ten-hour workdays, he figured he should have paid that debt off.

But when Lucas—slightly built and standing less than five and a half feet tall—inquired about the balance, Navarrete threatened to beat him should he ever try to leave. Instead of providing an accounting, Navarrete took Lucas's paychecks, cashed them, and randomly doled out pocket money, \$20 some weeks, other weeks \$50. Over the years, Navarrete and members of his extended family deprived Lucas of \$55,000.

Taking a day off was not an option. If Lucas became ill or was too exhausted to work, he was kicked in the head, beaten, and locked in the back of the truck. Other members of Navarrete's dozen-man crew were slashed with knives, tied to posts, and shackled in chains. On November 18, 2007, Lucas was again locked inside the truck. As dawn broke, he noticed a faint light shining through a hole in the roof. Jumping up, he secured a hand hold and punched himself through. He was free.

What happened at Navarrete's home would have been horrific enough if it were an isolated case. Unfortunately, involuntary servitude—slavery—is alive and well in Florida. Since 1997, law-enforcement officials have freed more than 1,000 men and women in seven different cases. And those are only the instances that resulted in convictions. Frightened, undocumented, mistrustful of the police, and speaking little or no English, most slaves refuse to testify, which means their captors cannot be tried. "Unlike victims of other crimes, slaves don't report themselves," said Molloy, who was one of the prosecutors on the Navarrete case. "They hide from us in plain sight."

And for what? Supermarket produce sections overflow with bins of perfect red-orange tomatoes even during the coldest months—never mind that they are all but tasteless. Large packers, which ship nearly \$500 million worth of tomatoes annually to major restaurants and grocery retailers nationwide, own or lease the land upon which the workers toil. But the harvesting is often done by independent contractors called crew bosses, who bear responsibility for hiring and overseeing pickers. Said Reggie Brown, executive vice president of the Florida Tomato Growers Exchange, "We abhor slavery and do everything we can to prevent it. We want to make sure that we always foster a work environment free from hazard, intimidation, harassment, and violence." Growers, he said, cooperated with law-enforcement officers in the Navarrete case.

But when asked if it is reasonable to assume that an American who has eaten a fresh tomato from a grocery store or food-service company during the winter has eaten fruit picked by the hand of a slave, Molloy said, "It is not an assumption. It is a fact."

Gerardo Reyes, a former picker who is now an employee of the [Coalition of Immokalee Workers \(CIW\)](#), a 4,000-member organization that provides the only voice for the field hands, agrees. Far from being an anomaly, Reyes told me, slavery is a symptom of a vast system of labor abuses. Involuntary servitude represents just one rung on a grim ladder of exploitation. Reyes said that the victims of this system come to Florida for one reason—to send money to their families back home. "But when they get here, it's all they can do to keep themselves alive with rent, transportation, food. Poverty and misery are the perfect recipe for slavery."

Tomato harvesting involves rummaging through staked vines until you have filled a bushel basket to the brim with hard, green fruits. You hoist the basket over your shoulder, trot across the field, and heave it overhead to a worker in an open trailer the size of the bed of a gravel truck. For every



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32-pound basket you pick, you receive a token typically worth about 45 cents—almost the same rate you would have gotten 30 years ago. Working at breakneck speed, you might be able to pick a ton of tomatoes on a good day, netting about \$50. But a lot can go wrong. If it rains, you can't pick. If the dew is heavy, you sit and wait until it evaporates. If trucks aren't available to transport the harvest, you're out of luck. You receive neither overtime nor benefits. If you are injured (a common occurrence, given the pace of the job), you have to pay for your own medical care.

Leaning against the railing of an unpainted wooden stoop in front of a putty-colored trailer, a tired Juan Dominguez told an all-too-familiar story. He had left for the fields that morning at six o'clock and returned at three. But he worked for only two of those nine hours because the seedlings he was to plant had been delivered late. His total earnings: \$13.76.

I asked him for a look inside his home. He shrugged and gestured for me to come in. In one ten-foot-square space there were five mattresses, three directly on the floor, two suspended above on sheets of flimsy plywood. The room was littered with T-shirts, jeans, running shoes, cheap suitcases. The kitchen consisted of a table, four plastic chairs, an apartment-size stove, a sink with a dripping faucet, and a rusty refrigerator whose door wouldn't close. Bare lightbulbs hung from fixtures, and a couple of fans put up a noisy, futile effort against the stale heat and humidity. In a region where temperatures regularly climb into the nineties, there were no air conditioners. One tiny, dank bathroom served ten men. The rent was \$2,000 a month—as much as you would pay for a clean little condo near Naples.

Most tomato workers, however, have no choice but to live like Dominguez. Lacking vehicles, they must reside within walking distance of the football-field-size parking lot in front of La Fiesta, a combination grocery store, taqueria, and check-cashing office. During the predawn hours, the lot hosts a daily hiring fair. I arrived a little before 5 a.m. The parking lot was filled with more than a dozen former school buses. Outside each bus stood a silent scrum of 40 or 50 would-be pickers. The driver, or crew boss, selected one worker at a time, choosing young, fit-looking men first. Once full, the bus pulled away.

Later that day, I encountered some of the men and women who had not been picked when I put in a shift at the Guadalupe Center of Immokalee's soup kitchen. Tricia Yeggy, the director of the kitchen, explained that it runs on two simple rules: People can eat as much as they want, and no one is turned away hungry. This means serving between 250 and 300 people a day, 44 per sitting, beginning at eleven o'clock. Cheerful retirees volunteer as servers, and the "guests" are unabashedly appreciative. The day's selection—turkey and rice soup with squash, corn, and a vigorous sprinkle of cumin—was both hearty and tasty. You could almost forget the irony: Workers who pick the food we eat can't afford to feed themselves.

The CIW has been working to ease the migrants' plight since 1993, when a few field hands began meeting sporadically in a church hall. Lucas Benitez, one of the coalition's main spokespeople, came to the group in its early years. Back then, the challenge was taking small steps, often for individual workers. To make the point, Benitez unfolded a crumpled shirt covered in dried blood. "This is Edgar's shirt," he said.

One day in 1996, a 16-year-old Guatemalan boy named Edgar briefly stopped working in the field for a drink of water. His crew boss bludgeoned him. Edgar fled and arrived at the coalition's door, bleeding. In response to the CIW's call for action, over 500 workers assembled and marched to the boss's house. The next morning, no one would get on his bus. "That was the last report of a worker being beaten by his boss in the field," said Benitez. The shirt is kept as a reminder that by banding together, progress is possible.

Even though the CIW has been responsible for bringing police attention to a half dozen slavery prosecutions, Benitez feels that slavery will persist until overall conditions for field workers improve. The group has made progress on that front by securing better pay. Between the early 1980s and the mid-1990s, the rate for a basket of tomatoes remained 40 cents—meaning that workers' real wages dropped as inflation rose. Work stoppages, demonstrations, and a hunger strike helped raise it to 45 cents on average, but the packers complained that competition for customers prevented them from paying more. One grower refused to enter a dialogue with CIW hunger strikers because, in his words, "a tractor doesn't tell the farmer how to run the farm." The CIW decided to try an end run around the growers by going directly to the biggest customers and asking them to pay one cent more per pound directly to the workers. Small change to supermarket chains and fast-food corporations, but it would add about twenty dollars to the fifty a picker makes on a good day, the difference between barely scraping by and earning a livable wage.

The Campaign for Fair Food, as it is called, first took aim at Yum! Brands, owner of Taco Bell, Pizza Hut, KFC, Long John Silver's, and A&W. After four years of pressure, Yum! agreed to the one-cent raise in 2005 and, importantly, pledged to make sure that no worker who picked its tomatoes was being exploited. McDonald's came aboard in 2007, and in 2008 [Burger King](#), Whole Foods Market, and Subway followed, with more expected to join up this year. But the program faces a major obstacle. Claiming that the farmers are not party to the arrangement, the Florida Tomato Growers Exchange, an agricultural cooperative that represents some 90 percent of the state's producers, has refused to be a conduit for the raise, citing legal concerns.

When the Navarrete case came to light, there were no howls of outrage from growers. Or from Florida government circles. When Cesar Navarrete, who pleaded guilty, was sentenced to 12 years in prison this past December, Terence McElroy of the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services offered his perspective on the crime: "Any legitimate grower certainly does not engage in that activity. But you're talking about maybe a case a year."

Charlie Frost, the Collier County Sheriff's Office detective who investigated and arrested Navarrete, disagrees. With one case wrapped up, he and prosecutor Molloy turned to several other active slavery cases. Sitting in his Naples office and pointing his index finger east, toward the fields of Immokalee, he said, "It's happening out there right now."

Lucas, who received a temporary visa for his testimony, is now back in the fields, still chasing the dream of making a little money to send back home.

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