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VIA FIRST CLASS AND ELECTRONIC MAIL

December 19, 2008

Charles H. Bronson, Commissioner
Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services,
The Capitol
Tallahassee, FL 32399-0800

Re: Specter of Slavery Persists in Fields

Dear Commissioner Bronson,

In a December 14, 2008 article in the Fort Myers *News-Press*, Terrence McElroy, identified as a spokesperson for Florida's Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, is reported as saying, "Of course, I say any instance [of slavery] is too many, and any legitimate grower certainly does not engage in that activity (slavery) but you're talking about maybe a case a year."

The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Florida is concerned that this statement diminishes the truth about the seriousness of human trafficking and modern-day slavery in Florida and the serious impact of such illicit activities in our state.

Instances of worker abuse that rise to the level of human slavery are shockingly prevalent in Florida. For example, of an estimated 800,000 victims of human trafficking each year internationally, it is believed that 18,000 to 20,000 are trafficked into Florida—one of the highest rates in the country. (See www.stophumantrafficking.org.)

As the United States Department of Justice's (USDOJ) website explains, "Victims are often lured with false promises of good jobs and better lives, and then forced to work under brutal and inhuman conditions." In 2008, two United Nations Special Rapporteurs visited Florida to investigate slavery and human trafficking, among other issues. There should be no doubt that human trafficking is widespread, hurting an untold number of people living in Florida, and deserving the greatest attention from elected officials who are charged with protecting the rights of workers.

The statement by the spokesperson for your Department raises the question that, if it is known that these incidents exist, why are they not being investigated and prosecuted?

Similarly, reports of slavery in Florida's tomato fields have gone unheeded and unaddressed. It should be no surprise that Reggie Brown, executive vice president of the Florida Tomato Growers Exchange, claims that reports of slavery in Florida tomato fields are "false and defamatory" and says "unequivocally" that "growers abhor and condemn slavery" – despite the recent case in which there was evidence documenting that slave crew leaders' pay "came from the growers." (See attached *News-Press* article.)

If more Floridians knew the truth about the conditions that farm workers, domestic workers, sex workers, and others providing forced labor face every day in Florida and around the United States, they would demand an end to such treatment.

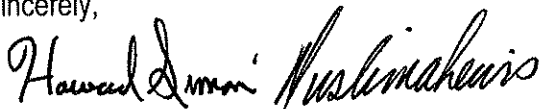
To diminish the problem of slavery hinders the hope for its end, in Florida and elsewhere. Thoughtful and decisive action by our public officials is needed to protect the thousands who are locked-up, hidden away, unremunerated, and exploited by a system that disregards the most basic of human rights.

Florida is home to slaves – women, children, and men. We must highlight the problem of modern slavery, and work to correct the atrocities taking place. As people throughout the United States and the world observe the sixtieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it is imperative that the principles set forth in that Declaration become a reality in Florida for everyone.

We call on you to repudiate the misguided remark of the spokesperson for your Department, and to take action to rid Florida of human trafficking and slavery in its many forms. In so doing, you can bring Florida into line with the Constitution and internationally recognized human rights standards.

If the ACLU of Florida can be of assistance to your office in facilitating meetings with victims of slavery, and if you need any additional information please don't hesitate to contact me at 786-363-2705.

Sincerely,



Howard Simon Muslima Lewis
Executive Director Director, Racial Justice Project

cc: Governor Charlie Crist
Terence McElroy