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Sean Sellers: Farmworker wages are still the issue

Sean Sellers - Guest Opinion

In her April 2 guest opinion, "Fixing immigration system would help fight against slavery," Barbara Mainster argues that the root cause of modern-day slavery in Florida's fields lies in the immigration status of the workers held against their will. She goes on to assert that "immigration reform is by far a higher priority than wages ... and working conditions" for Florida's farmworkers.

Mainster is a long-time, much-beloved child-care provider for the children of farmworkers. She should be at the top of anyone's list of experts in the field of migrant child care.

She is not, however, an expert on slavery. She has never gone undercover to work in a slavery ring. She has never helped terrified victims escape from a labor camp. She has never traveled the countryside painstakingly assembling the evidence necessary to meet the high standard of proof required to mount a federal slavery prosecution under laws stemming from the 13th Amendment. And, undoubtedly, she has never been forced to work against her will.

That is why her analysis of slavery is so unsophisticated, and so very wrong.

Florida agribusiness has always relied on desperate workers, well before the current influx of immigrant workers began in the 1970s. As part of this sordid history, convict leasing was practiced until 1923, providing invaluable "turpentine labor" in the state's pine forests. Florida's first migrant workers were sharecroppers fleeing the calamity of the boll weevil and collapsing cotton prices throughout the Southeast following World War I.

In such degraded labor environments - where wages were suppressed, with violence if necessary, and workers had no voice on the job - forced labor remained a tragic reality. In 1942, for example, the federal government indicted the U.S. Sugar Corp. for violating peonage statutes after managers allegedly threatened to shoot indebted workers if they tried to escape company-supervised labor camps.

But even today, agricultural slavery is not limited to immigrant workers. Fast-forward 60 years to 2001, when Michael Lee pleaded guilty to using debt, crack cocaine, and violence to enslave citrus harvesters he recruited from homeless shelters. In 2007, Ronald Evans was sentenced to 30 years in federal prison on similar charges. He too held homeless African-American workers in "a form of servitude morally and legally reprehensible," according to the Department of Justice.

Native-born, U.S. citizens are enslaved on Florida farms in the 21st century. Clearly, forced labor is not just a threat to immigrant workers.

A guest worker program will not address the root causes of slavery. Instead, as proven by this country's experiment with the Bracero Program between 1942 and 1964, it will create an underclass of disenfranchised workers. It is a subsidy from taxpayers to industries that are unwilling to pay the competitive wages necessary to attract a stable work force. Moreover, tying workers' visas to single employers may actually strengthen the hand of abusive employers

As Gov. Crist concurred last month, the solution to the scourge of slavery in Florida's fields lies with the Coalition of Immokalee Workers' Campaign for Fair Food. In the short term, it creates the first-ever market consequences for growers that use forced labor. In the long run, it raises the wage

floor and creates a voice for farmworkers in the industry, addressing the poverty and powerlessness that give rise to slavery in the first place.

Members of the CIW have gone undercover in slavery operations, have investigated and helped win federal slavery prosecutions, and, in all too many cases, have been held against their will, beaten by their employers - or worse - and forced to work for little or no pay. That is why the CIW has come up with a clear-eyed, comprehensive program designed to eradicate slavery, roots and all.

If Florida growers are serious about cleaning up their image, they must, in the words of Crist, "participate in the campaign," so that we may at long last end Florida's harvest of shame.
