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Letter from Luis Gabriel Flores Flores

The Honourable Marco E. L. Mendicino, P.C., M.P.

Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship
365 Laurier Avenue West, Ottawa, Ontario, K1A 1L1

July 30, 2020

Honorable Minister of Immigration,

I am sending this letter to you and hope you respond not just to me, but to all migrant and undocumented people in the country.

My story is the story of many others. I was punished for speaking up for my rights. What happened to me can and does happen to many migrant workers. Today, I am here to say to you and the media that I am not afraid. That I deserve dignity. That all of us deserve dignity. That all migrants need full and permanent immigration status immediately.

My name is Luis Gabriel Flores Flores. I come from Mexico City. I'm 36 years old. I have been in the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program (SAWP) for 6 years, and I have worked in Canada for four seasons. My family depends on me - my wife, two daughters, and a mother with disabilities who just had a major operation for which we still owe money.

I came to work on Scotlynn farm. When we first arrived we were taken to a hotel to quarantine for two weeks. Once we got to work, I saw that the housing conditions were very bad. The houses were in poor condition, communal bathrooms shared by many workers and in unsanitary condition, and household items in very poor condition. There was very little space in the rooms and in the houses; it was impossible to keep distance.

At work they pressured us a lot. They never let us rest and they were always on us. They watched us as if we were slaves. It was impossible to keep distance in the field or in the packing house, and we were mixed with workers from other houses. The employer never gave us protective gear - no gloves, no masks, no antibacterial gel.

This situation created the perfect conditions for the COVID-19 outbreak that made us ill. Several of our co-workers began to show symptoms, including Juan López Chaparro, with whom I shared a house.



Those who were getting sick and many others of us alerted the foremen that there were sick people and asked for them to get medical attention. They ignored us, and never did anything for those who were getting sick, other than giving them some medicine like Tylenol. It was not until the workers themselves called an ambulance for a co-worker who was in serious condition that the employers began to pay attention.

When we got tested, 199 of us were positive for COVID-19, including me. Five of our co-workers ended up in the hospital.

I was very unhappy with the conditions and mistreatment that led to this crisis and that is why I spoke to the press, anonymously, to shed light on what was happening. I spoke to the Globe & Mail on June 10 and the Toronto Star on June 13. I'm attaching those articles to this letter.

After we finished the second quarantine, we went back to work and saw that conditions really had hardly changed. On Saturday, June 20, they came to give us the news that Juan had died. The news shocked us. It left us very saddened and also afraid for our own lives. I told a foreman that the farm should take responsibility for what happened, that perhaps Juan's death and this illness could have been prevented if they had paid attention to us when we were asking for help. I told him that the employer owed us an explanation and asked him to ask the employer to come speak to the workers.

Several of us did not want to work the next day so we could mourn Juan's death. The foreman told us that those who didn't want to work could choose to stay home. But the next day the foremen came to threaten people, saying that those who did not go to work would be kept back and not paid for three days.

I decided to stay home that day, and it was then that the owner of the company came into my house. His name is Robert Biddle Jr., father of Scott Biddle, and his photo is attached. He accused me of having spoken to the press in a video and that they would be sending me back to Mexico at dawn the next morning. Then the foreman came to talk to me and reiterate what the boss had decided. He said that they suspected three other people of also speaking to the media and that they would do the same to them. I was in total shock - I never imagined something like this would happen to me.

I did not want to be deported - I have a responsibility to my family and we have unpaid debts from my mother's surgery. I decided to ask for support from people outside the farm. This is how I find myself here today, in front of your office, to ask for support from you too - not only for me but for all migrant workers.

What happened to me is what happens to migrant workers when they try to defend their rights. We have been subjected to a system of temporary immigration where if we stand up for ourselves, we are



deported. We need a comprehensive immigration solution in order for our rights to be respected. We spend most of the year in Canada, more time than we spend home with our families. We are an essential part of this economy and society and we deserve the same rights. We should be treated with equality and respect. That is why we need permanent resident status now, so workers can have the power to protect ourselves. Our health, our well-being, our families, and our lives depend on it.

I have come here with a message for your government: We will not be silenced by bad employers or bad laws. But you must act now if you want to avoid more abuse and more deaths.

And I have a message for all my fellow migrant farmworkers and all migrants in Canada: I am not afraid. It is our responsibility to speak up, for ourselves and for everyone. We are not alone. People support us.

We demand full immigration status for all. Minister Mendocino, do the right thing.

Sincerely,

Luis Gabriel Flores Flores

To respond to this letter, and to communicate with Mr Flores, please contact Syed Hussan at hussan@migrantworkersalliance.org