



January 30, 2023

RE: Invitation to visit New Orleans to discuss forced labor in Louisiana

Greetings:

The Promise of Justice Initiative and the Southern Poverty Law Center is grateful for the ongoing interest of the UN’s Expert Mechanism to Advance Racial Justice and Equality in Law Enforcement (EMLER) in issues of forced labor in the United States.

The United States incarcerates about 2 million people at any given time, making it the highest incarcerating nation in the world. Many of the people confined to prisons and jails are forced to work. The 13th Amendment, which protects against slavery and involuntary servitude, does so with the exception of anyone incarcerated with a criminal conviction.

The state of Louisiana has an incarceration rate of 1,094 per 100,000 people, a rate higher than any democracy in the world. When it comes to understanding the prison industrial complex in the United States, Louisiana is ground zero

The roots of incarceration and hard labor in Louisiana are directly linked to slavery. Following emancipation, an emboldened legislature began to pass laws, known as the black code, to criminalize behaviors that had historically not been punishable by law. The 1898 Louisiana Constitutional Convention convened with the explicit goal to “to establish the supremacy of the white race in this state to the extent to which it could be legally and constitutionally done.” Louisiana, for example, became one of only two states in the nation where people could be convicted of a crime by a non-unanimous jury, in an attempt to silence Black jurors. Today, 1,500 people remain in prison with unconstitutional non-unanimous convictions.

Many of our clients were sentenced to hard labor while incarcerated at the Louisiana State Penitentiary. The Penitentiary was a slave plantation until the 1840s. It was—and remains—known as “Angola,” reportedly because the “best” slaves came from that African country. Today, Angola is an 18,000-acre penal plantation that has retained many of its antebellum characteristics.



Every day, hundreds of primarily Black men are subjected to forced labor at Angola. Overseen by armed guards on horseback, they trudge into the fields to pick okra, corn, and soybeans for pennies an hour—or nothing at all. They toil in extreme heat and humidity, without basic safety gear or modern agricultural equipment, under threat of punishment if their work is unsatisfactory. The combination of these intolerable conditions subject workers to the substantial risk of life-threatening injuries and heat-stress illness.

PJI recently concluded an 18-month investigation into forced labor practices in jails and prisons across Louisiana, including at Angola. As part of that investigation, we recorded the testimonials of 22 people who were subjected to hard labor while incarcerated. Those narratives and other resources are available on our [End Plantation Prison Project website](#).

Together, PJI and SPLC invite EMLER to visit New Orleans to meet with individuals who have been directly impacted by forced labor in Louisiana. We would be honored to host a special screening of our End Plantation Prisons testimonial project, followed by a discussion with several individuals who survived sentences of hard labor. We could also coordinate a tour of Angola so the delegation could experience the penal plantation first-hand.

Please let us know if EMLER may be able to join us in New Orleans. We look forward to our ongoing collaboration.

Sincerely,

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