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Allegations of Modern-Day Slavery Emerge as Alabama Inmates Sue State Officials and Corporations



Michael Grant, former president of the Nashville Branch of the NAACP and the National Bankers Association, congratulates Tennessee Rep. Harold Love on his election as the next president of the National Black Caucus of State Legislators.

By **Stacy M. Brown**
 NNPA Newswire Senior
 National Correspondent

A group of current and former Alabama prisoners have filed a federal lawsuit, alleging that they were trapped in a "modern-day form of slavery" by being forced to work at fast-food chains for meager or no compensation. The comprehensive 129-page complaint, seeking class-action status, contends that the prisoners were victims of a "convict leasing" system, compelling them to work under exploitative conditions while the state of Alabama and its corporate partners reaped

substantial profits. The lawsuit, filed in the U.S. District Court for the Middle District of Alabama and first reported by the website Law & Crime, implicates over two dozen state officials, including Governor Kay Ivey and Attorney Gen-

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eral Steve Marshall, alongside numerous government agencies and private employers, including the Alabama Department of Corrections (ADOC). The plaintiffs argue that these entities have violated the Trafficking Victims Protection Act.

The complaint notes that while 26.8% of Alabama's population identifies as Black or African American, double that percentage constitutes the Black incarcerated population. Drawing historical parallels, the group compares the alleged labor-trafficking scheme to the enslavement of individuals in Alabama's cotton fields and subsequent sharecropping and convict leasing practices post-Civil War.

In a video statement, jailed activist Robert Earl Council, also known as Kinetik Justice, asserts that Ala-

bama's work programs are a continuation of pre-Civil War slavery. He accuses corporations and fast-food companies involved in these programs as complicit "slave masters," condemning their participation in the exploitation.

The complaint alleges that Alabama generates an annual \$450 million from forced labor, with inmates compelled to work against their will. At the same time, the ADOC claims 40% of gross earnings purportedly for the cost of incarceration. In a recent finding, the U.S. Department of Justice announced significant deficiencies in ADOC facilities, prompting a 2020 lawsuit against Alabama, citing widespread violence among prisoners and guards.

Individual plaintiff stories further underscore the harsh realities. Lakiera Walker, incarcerated from 2007 to 2023, recounted years of uncompensated work, including housekeeping, floor stripping, and employment at Burger King for a paltry \$2 per day. Walker details enduring sexual harassment, being forced to work while unwell, and the intimidation preventing many women from speaking out.

The lawsuit contends that the work programs create a paradoxical situation where inmates are denied parole for public safety reasons while simultaneously working without supervision at local businesses. The plaintiffs demand justice for what they describe as forced labor and aim to expose and rectify systemic exploitation within Alabama's prison system.

Book Fair

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counter harmful cultural stereotypes and find joy in their culture; and Anita Crawford Clark, whose first picture book, 'Old to Joy,' hit shelves in September after percolating in her imagination for two decades.

"I wrote the manuscript in '98, I sent it off to a few publishers, it was rejected," Clark told The Skanner. "Between then and 2020, I dabbled in it, but it wasn't until 2020 during COVID, as a teacher, that I finally had time to write and illustrate the book, and that's when I picked it up again and polished it off and tweaked it, and started connecting with the children's writing community."

An educator who holds masters' degrees in both creative writing and media psychology, Clark said she felt drawn to Beatrice Potter books when she was a child, "maybe because the characters weren't White, they were animals, and I could relate to them."

She was entering the "kids lit" field at a time when representation of Black characters and Black stories still lagged far behind that of White narratives, but 2020 was a year when that began to shift for the better, Clark recalled. She found a supportive community on Twitter, specifically through what is known as Black Creators HQ.

"All these Black creators, we all started coming together, and we would bring in agents and editors and established authors, and they would tell us and teach us how to break through in this industry," Clark said. "This was people of all colors and different backgrounds that would come and speak to us, and editors would give us opportunities to submit our work to them, get on top of the 'slush pile,' as they call it."

In June of that year, Black author L.L. McKinney launched the hashtag "publishingpaidme," which encouraged BIPOC and White authors to share the amounts of their publishing advances.

When compiled, the numbers made obvi-

ous the huge discrepancy between how White and Black authors were paid – often, award-winning authors of color were still paid far less than virtually unknown White writers.

"The difference was staggering – not in the thousands, in the tens of thousands," Clark said. "For the same level of work. And the reason the book companies were (giving) was because, 'well, people don't read books with Black characters.' And 'Black people don't read books at the same rate.'"

Clark said, "When that hashtag came out, people were getting exposed, publishing companies were getting exposed. And then you really just saw a flood, a really concerted effort, to be more inclusive. We're still not there, but there's been some improvement."

Clark said her own experience documenting her book on social media undermined the publishing industry rationale that non-Black readers don't pick up works by Black authors.

"When I posted pictures of my work in progress, I was blown away by the response from people who aren't Black. Even though the focus is

on Black culture and my character is Black, the experiences are germane to people of all cultures. All cultures experience joy and heartache and grief and sadness and elation and love. And that's when I realized, wow, that's really what picture books do. This is something we can all identify with."

Bradford is hoping to make the BIPOC Book Fair a yearly event.

"What I would really love to do is to be able to do this event every year here in Portland and do this event in other cities," she said. "Each city is going to have different resources, and my hope is that we will be able to create a blueprint and say, 'Please go and create a BIPOC Book Fair in your town.'"

The inaugural BIPOC Book Fair will be held Dec. 23 from 12 to 4 p.m. at Norse Hall (111 N.E. 11th Ave., Portland). The event offers books by BIPOC authors, of every genre, for early readers to 17-year-olds. Tickets are \$5, and low-income families can request a fee waiver. Masks are required for all attendees. Tickets and more information available at <https://carlbrandon.org/bbf>.



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Love

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get caught up in the moment-in-time snapshot of election day...But we must also look for opportunities to serve on local and state level boards and commissions. We miss local and state level boards. Or we can shadow someone in a legacy organization like the NAACP and the National Urban League and engage in that work."

The 2010 flood that damaged a section of Black Nashville, gave Love the opportunity to put the Rev. Dixon's advice to work. By taking the initiative and helping to organize the recovery funded by FEMA, a grateful community encouraged Love to seek office again. This time, in 2012, he was resoundingly elected to represent the 58th district of the Tennessee General Assembly.