

EDITION: U.S.

[CA](#) [Canada](#) [US](#) [United States](#) [UK](#) [United Kingdom](#)

November 11, 2011

HUFF
POST **CRIME**

THE INTERNET NEWSPAPER: NEWS BLOGS VIDEO COMMUNITY

[Like](#)

487K

CONNECT

Search the Huffington

[Dan Rather](#)

Host, 'Dan Rather Reports'

GET UPDATES FROM Dan Rather

[Like](#)

758

An American Nightmare

Posted: 11/10/11 01:39 PM ET

React



I recently finished an investigation into what's being called one of the largest cases of human trafficking in U.S. history. The project was eye-opening because, before starting, I thought of the crime of human trafficking as inherently violent -- women snatched off the street at gunpoint and forced to sell their bodies; foreign workers indentured and exploited by the violent criminals who snuck them into the U.S. But our report, "American Nightmare", which aired on HDNet, tells a very different story. The alleged victims we found never faced violence or physical threats, but claim they were victims of a modern form of slavery nonetheless.

When hundreds of skilled pipe fitters and welders left their homes in India to work in the United States, they weren't running from war or poverty or repression -- but towards opportunity. Their lives were good. They were young men with new families, living in modest but comfortable homes paid for with hard work.

But there was a high demand -- and potential fortune -- for skilled welders to help with the massive rebuilding effort in the post-Katrina Gulf Coast. The storm had scattered the population of the Gulf Coast and thinned the ranks of Mobile, Alabama-based shipbuilder, Signal International. When the company began getting lucrative contracts to repair and build oil rigs and barges, it looked to India for new workers. The company found scores of men there who were eager to earn better wages in the U.S. -- even if it meant leaving behind family and friends, and moving to shipyards thousands of miles away in Mississippi and Texas.

The pay was good, but even better was the promise made by their new employer: Green Cards for the workers and their families. One of the workers, Aby Raju, was about to get married when he signed on with Signal.

"If I'm going to get married, financially I need to be secure," he told us. "So I think it's a good opportunity to take care of my new family."

Like generations of foreign born workers before them, these 500 men were chasing the American dream. But it wasn't until they arrived to the United States that they realized they had been lured into an American nightmare. The men claim they were victims of human trafficking -- that Signal lured them to the U.S. with false hopes and kept them bound in forced labor with the threat of financial ruin.

Before coming to the United States, Signal's recruiters forced the workers to pay up to \$20,000 in recruiting fees, a fortune for a middle-class Indian. They mortgaged homes and sold family jewelry, expecting that they would make the money back and then some. But even with Signal's competitive wages, the workers were unable to climb out of the deep hole of debt. And the workers say this

allowed Signal to keep them in a perpetual state of indentured servitude.

"Servitude doesn't require chains and iron," said Alan Howard, the lead attorney representing workers in their class action lawsuit against Signal. "It's economic coercion, psychological coercion, the debts that are incurred to pay recruiting fees to come to the country. They can be just as effective instruments of exploitation."

Signal refused to speak to us on camera, citing ongoing litigation --the company not only faces a class action lawsuit by the workers, but another that supports the workers' allegations that was recently filed by the federal government. But in writing, the company denied wrongdoing.

That's hard to square with what our investigation found. The workers were housed in so-called mancamps -- trailers a few yards from the noisy shipyards. Secretly-recorded videos show squalid and overcrowded conditions. And the private journal of a Signal supervisor -- discovered on a company computer that was subpoenaed in the case -- described a filth and disease. The supervisor wrote: "Our Indians have been dropping with sickness like flies."

And on top of all this, the workers were forced to pay more than \$1,000-a-month in rent, or about a third of their monthly salary -- whether they lived in the camps or chose to rent an apartment elsewhere. The company says the housing was provided as a service to workers, since Katrina had destroyed so many local apartment buildings. But the workers said there was no shortage of nearby housing that was much cheaper and cleaner than what Signal was providing.

And then there were the promised Green Cards: they never came. The workers were brought to the U.S. using special visas for seasonal guest workers. As temporary workers, the Indians were ineligible for permanent residency. Signal has previously said it was unaware its recruiters had promised permanent residence in the U.S. for the Indian workers. But the company's lawyer told us that it didn't know until much later that U.S. immigration law precluded the guest workers from getting Green Cards.

Many of the workers were eventually granted special visas for victims of human trafficking, and are working legally in the U.S. Neither their lawsuit nor the federal case have gone to trial yet. But the workers we spoke to say they already have found some degree of justice by having their voices heard. And they recognize that there are few places outside of the United States where this would be possible.

Dan Rather Reports airs Tuesdays on [HDNet](#) at 8 p.m. and 11 p.m. ET. This program is now available on [iTunes](#). You can also follow us on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).

Sponsored Links

53 Year Old Mom Looks 25

The Stunning Results of Her \$4 Wrinkle Trick Has Botox Docs Worried
www.LifestylesAlert.com/MUST-SEE

Penny Stock Soaring 3000%

Sign up for Free to find out what the next 3000% Stock Winner Is!
www.PennyStocksUniverse.com

FTTN - Game Changer Stock

Natural Shale Gas Stock Soaring View Ticker and Invest Today
www.FirstTitanEnergy.com

Are Annuities Safe?

Don't Buy Any Annuity Until You Watch This Special Video Report!
SeniorAnnuityAlert.com

Buy a link here

More in Crime...

- Comments
- 62
- Pending Comments
- 2
- [View FAQ](#)

Our moderators screen these comments before they are published

View All

Favorites

Recency |

Popularity

Page: **1** [2](#) [3](#) [Next >](#) [Last »](#) (3 total)

-

Page: **1** [2](#) [3](#) [Next >](#) [Last »](#) (3 total)