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# Human trafficking decision will allow class action suits for guest workers, says civil rights groups

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By: [Mark Rockwell](#)

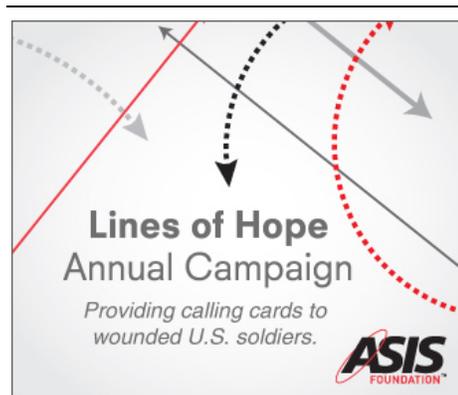
A federal judge's decision to grant class action status to a group of immigrant Filipino teachers who were allegedly duped into forced labor in Louisiana could be used to protect other guest workers in the U.S., said the civil rights group representing the teachers.



A recent ruling by federal judge in the Central District of California granted class action status in a human trafficking lawsuit involving more than 350 Filipino teachers is the first time the federal *Trafficking Victims Protection Act* (TVPA) has been applied to a group of people, rather than just individual victims, said the Southern Poverty Law Center on Dec. 20. The ruling, it said, sets a precedent by showing that the TVPA's legal protections can be applied on a class-wide basis.

The most recent ruling, said the group, follows another significant decision by a judge that allowed the TVPA to apply to teachers. According to the SPLC, in making the ruling, the judge recognized congress intended the law to extend to cases involving more subtle forms of coercion and not only cases of physical force, restraint or direct threats.

SPLC and the other groups filed the [suit](#) on behalf of the Filipino guest workers who said they were lured from their home country to teach in Louisiana public schools only to be forced into exploitive contracts by labor contractors. The lawsuit accuses officials of two labor contractors – Universal Placement International, based in Los Angeles, and its sister organization, Manila-based PARS International Placement Agency – of human



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trafficking and racketeering.

The SPLC filed its lawsuit, *Nunag Tanedo v. East Baton Rouge Parish School Board* in August 2010. The teachers are represented by the Southern Poverty Law Center, the American Federation of Teachers and the law firm of Covington & Burling LLP. The lawsuit is scheduled for trial next July.

The teachers began arriving in the United States in 2007 as part of the H-1B guest worker program, which is administered by the Department of Labor and permits foreign nationals with special skills to work in the United States for a period of up to six years. According to SPLC, most of the teachers involved in the suit, paid about \$16,000 to obtain their jobs.

Nearly all the teachers had to borrow money to pay the recruiting fees, said SPLC. The recruiters referred the teachers to private lenders who charged three to five percent interest per month, it said. Teachers were forced to pay the fees because they had already made substantial financial investments that would not be returned. The recruiters confiscated their passports and visas until they paid, according to SPLC.

The civil rights group said the teachers were also forced to sign away an additional 10 percent of the salaries they would earn during their second year of teaching. Teachers who resisted signing the contracts were threatened with being sent home and losing the thousands they had already paid, it said.

"This is a significant decision that offers great hope for the more than 350 Filipino teachers victimized by this abusive scheme," said Jim Knoepp, a Southern Poverty Law Center attorney on the case. "It also sets a powerful legal precedent that will help many more human trafficking victims receive justice."

"The judge's decision is great news for education workers and for students," said Lorretta Johnson, secretary-treasurer of the American Federation of Teachers. "Not only does it bring these teachers one step closer to justice, it sends the message that recruiters who make a profit by taking advantage of workers will not be tolerated. The AFT applauds this decision and vows to continue in our mission to make sure all educational employees, who make a difference every day in the lives of students, are treated with fairness and respect."

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