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## Signal International lawsuit could be largest human trafficking case in US history - India Abroad

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Attorneys for Indian guest workers who are suing Mississippi-based marine and fabrication company Signal International along with its co-conspirators and other entities for human trafficking and racketeering have filed for class certification to include hundreds of additional workers in the lawsuit. If class status is granted by the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Louisiana, the lawsuit could be the largest human trafficking case in US history.

"Over 400 workers have given consent letters to join the class action suit. We expect another 100 workers may also join it," said Chandra Bhatnagar, Human Rights Program staff attorney with the American Civil Liberties Union.

The Southern Poverty Law Center, the ACLU, the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund, the Louisiana Justice Institute and the law firm Dewey & LeBoeuf LLP filed the original proposed class action lawsuit on behalf of the seven individuals, who seek to represent a class of approximately 500 former guest workers who say they were lured to work in the US after Hurricane Katrina and subjected to racial and national origin discrimination, forced labor, and other abuse.

Labor recruiters Sachin Dewan in Mumbai and Michael Pol and immigration attorney Malvern Burnett are also defendants in the suit.

The story began in 2003, when workers saw advertisements--placed allegedly by Dewan--promising Indian welders and pipe-fitters green cards and permanent residence in the US for the men and their families.

Signal has shipyards in Mississippi, Texas and Alabama, and is a subcontractor for major multi-national companies. After Hurricane Katrina scattered its workforce, Signal retained its co-defendants to import employees to work as welders and pipe fitters, the suit noted. Between 2004 and 2006, hundreds of Indian men paid as much as \$ 20,000 each for travel, visa, recruitment and other fees. But when they arrived at Signal in late 2006 and early 2007, they discovered that they wouldn't receive the green cards as promised, but rather a 10-month guest worker visa (H2-B).

"Green card was the main attraction," one of the victims said. "If they told us that we would be allowed to stay only for 10 months, most of us would not have come at all,"

The lawsuit says Signal also forced them to pay \$1,050 a month to live in overcrowded, unsanitary and racially segregated labor camps where 24 men shared a trailer with only two toilets. When the workers tried to find their own housing, Signal officials allegedly told them they would still have the rent deducted from their paychecks. Visitors were supposedly not allowed into the fenced camps. Company employees who stood guard at the camps regularly searched the workers' belongings and workers who complained were threatened with deportation, according to the lawsuit.

In 2008 the workers and presented themselves as victims of human trafficking before the public and officials of the Department of Justice. They organized protest rallies and marched to Washington, DC. Several workers undertook protest fasts. Some of the workers said many of them got visas given to victims of human trafficking.

Signal International said the workers received wages above the prevailing wages for their skills. It also claimed that it never promised green cards. Bhatnagar said Signal is also suing the immigration attorneys for wrong promises.

"Signal is a multibillion dollar company and if the court allows damages and compensation to the workers, they are able to pay it," Bhatnagar said. "These courageous men who have been victimized by systemic deficiencies in the US guest worker program and subjected to trafficking and racketeering at the hands of the defendants are seeking to assert their fundamental human rights. We hope the court will certify the class and enable several hundred of their fellow Indian guest workers to have their day in court."

Signal and the other defendants, said Kurian David, a class representative in the lawsuit,

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Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF)

99 Hudson St, 12th Fl  
New York, NY 10013

tel: 212 966 5932

fax: 212 966 4303

email: [info@aaldef.org](mailto:info@aaldef.org)

"should be held accountable for what they did to so many Indian guest workers who worked for them, so that others won't have to go through the same terrible things."

Murugan Kandhasamy, another worker in the lawsuit, said, "I speak on behalf of hundreds of Indian guest workers subjected to abuse by Signal and its co-conspirators. We came to America for good jobs and opportunity, which we were denied, and now we are asking for justice."

"After being treated as disposable workers, these Indian guest workers are entitled to seek justice for their wholesale mistreatment. They toiled under a climate of fear and coercion and deserve their day in court," said Ivy Suriyopas, AALDEF staff attorney.

Alan Howard of Dewey & LeBoeuf, which has been jointly litigating the case on a pro bono basis, said, "Class certification is warranted because that is precisely how defendants treated plaintiffs, as a class--albeit second-class--group of workers who could be exploited for higher profits."

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