

Federal lawsuit targets companies for labor trafficking

EEOC alleges that foreign pipefitters brought in on H-2B visas were abused

On April 20, the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) announced prosecution of some of the worst abuses ever encountered in the agency's 45-year history. EEOC filed federal lawsuits against companies that trafficked hundreds of foreign workers to Washington, Hawaii, Texas, and Mississippi and forced them to work under conditions of shocking exploitation.

One of the defendants is Signal International, which builds and repairs oil rigs at shipyards along the Gulf Coast. According to the EEOC lawsuit, Signal International brought over 500 pipefitters and welders from India between October 2006 and March 2007. Signal was able to import the workers under temporary H-2B visas, after telling the U.S. government it could not find enough qualified American workers to meet its workload in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

In India, the workers were recruited under false promises that the visas would lead to green cards and permanent residency in the United States, and

they paid recruiters up to \$20,000 each for their jobs. Upon arrival at Signal shipyards in Pascagoula, Mississippi, and Orange, Texas, the workers were made to sign forms, in English, committing them to pay over \$1,000 a month for housing, transportation and food — whether or not they ate the company's food or lived in its housing. The housing consisted of what the company called "man camps" — a series of one-room modular trailers connected by elevated walkways, enclosed by barbed wire fences and accessible through a single guarded entrance. The camps were located in isolated industrial areas, miles from anywhere. Each trailer housed up to 24 men in two-tiered bunk beds, packed so tightly it was difficult to move between bunks. In separate mess hall trailers, workers were fed poor quality food. Toilets were insufficient, and workers had to line up in the morning to shower or relieve themselves. Workers were not allowed to have visitors. They had their bags searched when they entered, and were also subjected to surprise searches of their belongings by camp guards employed by Signal. Guards enforced camp rules with fines of \$250 for the first violation and \$500 for the second.

Workers also had \$100 to \$200 a week deducted from their wages to pay for tool kits they were required to buy

from the company.

Signal International assigned numbers to each Indian employee, and called workers by their numbers instead of their names. Supervisors also used offensive and insulting language, calling workers thieves, animals, rats, "f...ing Keralites," and "whining little bitches," and telling them that their company living conditions were better than those of the slums of India.

When workers complained to managers, they were threatened with deportation. On March 4, 2007, a group of workers at the Pascagoula shipyard met with attorneys at a local church. The company got wind of it, and called the wife of one of the workers, in India, threatening he'd be deported. Five days later, five Signal guards locked the gate to the "man camp," swept through the bunkhouses looking for workers who had organized the church meeting, and forcibly brought them to another trailer. The plan was to fire the ringleaders and put them immediately on a plane back to India, but one of the workers foiled the plan by cutting his wrists in an attempt at suicide.

In separate lawsuits, EEOC accused a Beverly Hills-based labor contractor, Global Horizons, of similar abuses against workers brought from Thailand to work on farms in Hawaii and Washington. According to the lawsuit, be-

tween 2003 and 2007, Global Horizons enticed over 200 Thai men with false promises of steady, high-paying agricultural jobs along with temporary visas allowing them to live and work legally in the United States. But upon workers' arrival in the United States, Global Horizons confiscated their passports and threatened them with deportation if they complained. To get jobs and passage, Thai workers had paid hefty recruitment fees to Global Horizons, but their farm wages were low — far less than promised — with the result that they and their families back in Thailand were severely

in debt to the company. On the farms, Thai workers lived in vermin-infested company housing and were forbidden to leave. At work, they endured screaming, threats and physical assaults by overseers, and were isolated from non-Thai farm workers working under more tolerable conditions.

In addition to Global Horizons, the suits name six Hawaiian farms as defendants: Del Monte Fresh Produce, Kauai Coffee Company, Captain Cook Coffee Company, Kelena Farms, Mac Farms, Maui Pineapple Company; as well as

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Local voters mostly reject union picks in Oregon's May 17 election

In a May 17 special election, Portland voters narrowly rejected a six-year \$548 million Portland Public Schools bond measure that might have put union members to work repairing and remodeling schools. But the majority did vote to increase and extend a property tax levy that will prevent 200 teacher layoffs. The bond measure had 49.58 percent support, failing by 993 votes. The levy passed easily 58 to 42 percent. Both measures were backed by Northwest Oregon Labor Council (NOLC) and Columbia Pacific Building and Construction Trades Council (CP-BCTC), and numerous locals.

In a press statement after the election, PPS Superintendent Carole Smith said the bond defeat "doesn't mark an end of the conversation, but rather the start of a new phase. School buildings are still crumbling. They need serious safety upgrades, and they lack the facilities students need to compete." District leaders may regroup and come back to voters at a later date with a scaled-back proposal.

In candidate races, NOLC and CP-BCTC picks fared poorly. Harold Williams, endorsed by the building

trades council, won re-election to Portland Community College Zone 2 Director, garnering 47.33 percent of the vote in a four-way race. But other endorsed candidates lost:

- Former state representative Chuck Riley lost a race for PCC director for Zone 7, Washington County, with 39.7 percent of the vote.

- Mike Delman, endorsed by NOLC, lost his re-election race for Multnomah Education Service District, with 46.75 percent of the vote.

- Maggie Brister-Mashia placed second in a three-way contest for Portland Public Schools board, earning 30.25 percent of the vote.

- Retired Sheet Metal Local 16 business agent Mike Smith also came in second in a three-way race for Reynolds School District, earning 28 percent of the vote.

But a unionist did win elected office in Cottage Grove. Oregon School Employees Association past president Mervene Martin won election to South Lane School Board — where she worked for 22 years as an educational assistant. Martin was endorsed by the Lane County Labor Council.

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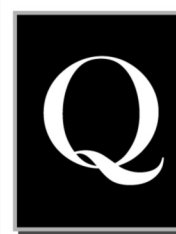
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