

Indian workers win USD 20 ml settlement against US company

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New York: Nearly 200 Indian workers, brought to the US by an American marine construction firm to repair damaged oil rigs and other facilities in the aftermath of the Hurricane Katrina, have won a USD 20 million settlement against the company accused of defrauding and exploiting them.

The agreement has been reached to resolve numerous labour trafficking lawsuits against Signal International that was found liable by a federal jury this year for defrauding and exploiting workers it lured from India.

The lawsuits are among the largest labour trafficking cases in US history.

The Alabama-based company will also issue an apology to the Indian workers, who brought to the US to be employed as welders, pipefitters and in other positions to repair oil rigs and other facilities damaged by the 2005 hurricane.

The workers allegedly each paid the labor recruiters and a lawyer between USD 10,000 and USD 20,000 or more in recruitment fees and other costs after recruiters promised good jobs, green cards and permanent US residency for them and their families.

Most sold property or plunged their families deeply into debt to pay the fees, according to a statement yesterday from Southern Poverty Law Centre (SPLC), a civil rights law firm that spearheaded the lawsuits.

However, when the men arrived from India in 2006, they discovered that they would not receive the green cards or permanent residency that had been promised.

The company also allegedly forced them each to pay USD 1,050 a month to live in "isolated, guarded labor camps" where as many as 24 men were cramped in small rooms while none of the company's non-Indian workers were required to live in the company housing.

Signal has filed for bankruptcy protection and the agreement, once approved, would resolve the 11 lawsuits against it representing the more than 200 Indian workers.

"These workers have waited seven long years for justice. This agreement and apology from the company will allow the workers to finally move on with their lives. It also serves as a warning to companies that might exploit guest workers," SPLC deputy legal director Jim Knoepp said.

In February, a federal jury in New Orleans awarded USD 14 million in damages to five Indian guest workers represented by the SPLC, finding that the company and its agents engaged in labor trafficking, fraud, racketeering and discrimination.

The jury also found that one of the plaintiffs was a victim of false imprisonment and retaliation.

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