

Indian Guest Workers Sue Company In MS, TX

The Associated Press

GULFPORT, Miss. (AP) — Dozens of Indian guest workers are suing an Alabama-based marine and fabrication company, claiming it financially exploited them and forced them to live in squalid conditions after bringing them to work at Gulf Coast shipyards after Hurricane Katrina.

Three federal lawsuits backed by the Southern Poverty Law Center were filed Tuesday in Mississippi and Texas on behalf of 83 people who worked for Signal International LLC after the 2005 storm slammed into the coast.

The center filed a similar suit in New Orleans in 2008 on behalf of 12 plaintiffs, but a judge refused to certify it as a class action. The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission also sued the company in 2011. Both cases are still pending.

A Signal International lawyer said she hadn't seen the new lawsuits and declined to comment on their allegations. A phone call to the company's headquarters Mobile, Ala., wasn't immediately returned.

The plaintiffs claim Signal used the federal government's H-2B guest worker program to recruit them to work as welders and pipefitters at its facilities in Pascagoula, Miss., and Orange, Texas.

"The cornerstone of the defendants' scheme was the tantalizing prospect that Signal would be able to hire a skilled workforce at effectively no cost by forcing the plaintiffs and their coworkers to foot the bill for their own recruitment, immigration processing, and travel," says the suit filed Tuesday in Gulfport, Miss.

Signal falsely promised to help the workers apply for and receive greens cards, the suit alleges.

"Put simply, plaintiffs had been deceived into taking on life-altering debt for something that was never going to happen," says the suit, which also claims workers were required to live in camps that exposed them to "barbaric and prison-like conditions."

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