

# Workers Sue Gulf Coast Company That Imported Them

**THE NEW YORK TIMES**

March 11, 2008

By ADAM NOSSITER

NEW ORLEANS — A group of 500 foreign welders and pipefitters brought in to work at Gulf Coast oil rig yards after Hurricane Katrina said Monday that they had sued their employer, claiming they were lured with false promises of permanent-resident status, forced to live in inhumane conditions and then threatened when they protested.

The workers were recruited in India and the United Arab Emirates and brought in late 2006 and early 2007 under the government's temporary guest worker program. They worked at Signal International, an oil-rig repair and construction company with yards in Pascagoula, Miss., about 85 miles east of here, and in Orange, Tex., about 100 miles east of Houston.

The company said it had brought them in to supplement a labor force depleted by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

At a rally here Monday, workers and their lawyers said they had given up life savings, sold family jewelry and paid up to \$20,000 in immigration and travel fees after being assured that the company would help them to become permanent residents of the United States.

In a statement, the company called the workers' charges "baseless and unfounded" and said it had spent "over \$7 million constructing state-of-the-art housing complexes" for the workers. The company said that the "vast majority of the workers" recruited had been satisfied with their conditions and that the workers were being paid "in excess" of prevailing rates and in full compliance with the law.

Workers and their advocates disputed those assertions. Ignorant of American immigration law, advocates said, the workers were unaware that they had been brought in only temporarily.

"They didn't know they were guest workers," said Stephen Boykewich of the New Orleans Workers' Center for Racial Justice. "They thought they were getting permanent status."

The green cards enabling residency never materialized, according to the lawsuit, and the workers were forced to live in overcrowded guarded "bunkhouses" at Signal International, with inadequate toilets and unhygienic kitchens that frequently made them ill.

The class-action lawsuit was filed by the Southern Poverty Law Center of Montgomery, Ala., among other groups.

The workers' assertions are the latest in a series of complaints about exploitation of foreign laborers on the Gulf Coast after Hurricane Katrina.

Previous complaints have involved Hispanic hotel and construction workers and farm laborers and have centered on low pay and harsh working conditions.

In the summer of 2006, Hispanic hotel workers sued a prominent New Orleans developer over inadequate pay, and last month, fruit pickers walked off the job in a parish north of here over exploitative conditions.

The Southern Poverty Law Center has also sued on behalf of immigrant workers involved in the reconstruction and cleanup of New Orleans after the storm. It maintains that immigrants brought in under the guest worker program are "systematically exploited and abused," all over the country.