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Union claims Filipino teachers held in 'virtual servitude' in Louisiana

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By Greg Toppo

Unions representing teachers in Louisiana have filed a complaint with state authorities alleging that a Los Angeles recruiting firm broke the law by holding more than 350 Filipino teachers in "virtual servitude" in order to hold onto their jobs in five Louisiana parish school systems, including New Orleans' [Recovery School District](#).

The complaint, filed Wednesday by the Louisiana Federation of Teachers and its parent organization, the [American Federation of Teachers](#) (AFT), alleges that Universal Placement International charged Filipino nationals about \$15,000 apiece to get jobs — more than 40% of some new teachers' salaries in a few Louisiana parishes — and required that they pay 10% of their monthly salary for two years to keep them.

The two unions want the firm to repay the fees to teachers and want the state to invalidate Universal's contracts and prosecute its officials.

The new filing comes less than three weeks after the AFT issued a report saying that about 19,000 teachers were working in the USA on temporary visas in 2007 — a growing recruitment trend as schools struggle to hire enough highly qualified teachers in hard-to-staff subjects such as math, science, foreign languages and special education. AFT says the field is largely unregulated and suffers from "widespread and egregious" abuses of migrant teachers.

"This is the kind of exploitation that we have read (about) in history books and taught our students — the fact that teachers would be subject to it in the United States in the 21st century is just totally and completely immoral," says AFT President [Randi Weingarten](#). She notes that the allegations still have to be investigated, but says that, if true, it'd be "mind-blowing that a recruiter could actually get away with this. Even if it was an isolated incident, it would be horrible, but my hunch right now is that it's not isolated."

In Louisiana, many of the Filipino teachers told union investigators that they were required to rent housing provided by Universal, which sublet apartments at a profit. The complaint also alleges that Universal threatened to "take them back to the airport for a return flight to the Philippines" if teachers questioned the contract terms.

The state union's president, Steve Monaghan, said in a statement issued Thursday that he believes the complaint, filed with the state Workforce Commission and attorney general, will prompt "other migrant educators" to come forward with their own complaints of mistreatment.

Calls to Universal seeking comment were not immediately returned.

The complaint also alleges that Universal violated Louisiana law by charging workers before they drew their first paycheck and by not maintaining an office in the state. It also

violated federal law, the union says, by charging teachers some \$6,600 in H-1B visa application fees, which employers are obligated to pay.