

Human trafficking of Indian guest workers alleged in Mississippi shipyard; Contractor defends 290-man camp

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Paid \$18.50 an hour, but living twenty to a trailer and fighting for spoons

A month ago Monday, a group of guest workers from India placed a frantic 3:00 am phone call to Saket Soni, lead organizer for the New Orleans Workers' Center for Racial Justice. The workers said that armed security guards were holding some workers prisoner in the TV room of the [Signal International Shipyard](#) in Pascagoula, Mississippi, where the company's 290 welders and pipe fitters live.

The men told Soni that Signal International – a [sub-contractor](#) for mammoth defense contractor Northrop Grumman – had staged a pre-dawn raid and that six Indian workers had been detained in the “TV room,” flanked by security guards, one of whom carried a gun. About 200 other Indian employees at Signal were standing outside the room.

Signal says they detained the guest workers at the advice of US immigration officials, in an attempt to forcibly deport them following a labor dispute. Though the workers were later released into the custody of community groups, the incident has shed light on a longstanding immigration problem – the vulnerability of guest workers who travel to the United States on H-2B visas, and their exploitation at the hands of so-called “recruiters” and the companies they work for.

Indian workers Joseph Jacob and Sabu Lal believe the Mar. 9 raid was initiated as Signal's reaction to worker complaints, while the company says the workers were fired for performance-related issues.

But the bigger story is in the details: These 290 Indians paid upwards of \$15,000 each to travel to America, lured by the promises of a Mississippi sheriff's deputy.

Deputy Michael Pol is also the president of Global Resources, Inc., a placement firm that recruits Indian workers to fill jobs in the US. Global Resources works with local recruiting firms in India to enlist talent and with U.S.-based immigration attorneys to secure visas for the workers.

The Indian workers recruited by Signal International paid on average between \$15,000 and \$20,000 to Pol. For some, the sum represented their life savings. The six workers who face deportation are terrified of returning to India, where

they now face loan sharks and the disappointment of their families. After the raid, Sabu Lal attempted suicide.

Overseas recruiters lure guest workers to the U.S. with lavish promises of permanent residency, high-paying jobs and better living conditions, charging thousands of dollars in “processing fees.” Guest workers are usually deeply in debt by the time they arrive in the U.S., where the companies that hire them often charge additional fees for boarding, food and expenses.

Those companies have an incentive to charge by the day, because they save money on taxes when they deduct living expenses from an employee’s wages instead of paying an equivalent sum to the employees and letting them secure their own housing and food. Signal charges residents \$35 a day for living expenses.

John Sanders, who manages Signal's workers’ camp, says his firm was also tricked by Pol, who promised to supply the company with badly-needed Indian welders and pipe-fitters and arrange their passage free of charge. The camp manager says he was shocked when workers told him that they had borrowed thousands of dollars at what he calls “usurious” interest rates from money lenders back in India.

Sanders says Pol lied to Signal about how much the workers were paying him because that enabled him to arrange their passage to the US for free. “We thought, somebody's paying something, otherwise you wouldn't be in business,” Sanders added

Signal management called Pol to their offices last November to ask why he’d told the company workers were only paying \$2,000 apiece. Signal demanded that Pol refund half the money that each worker had paid. When he refused, Signal terminated Pol’s contract. Reached by telephone, Pol declined to comment and referred **RAW STORY** calls to his attorney.

Joseph Jacob, a welder from Kerala who is now facing deportation and staying with community activists, says Pol also promised him permanent resident status. Under his visa, he was actually only entitled to stay in the US for one year.

A 3:00 am raid

Sabu Lal says Signal security guards burst into the trailers at 3:00 am and began calling the men by their company-issued ID numbers. Lal and Jacob believe they were targeted because they spoke better English than most of their peers and because they had spoken out at a church meeting.

Jacob says a Signal manager escorted him into the camp’s TV room and told him and other workers they weren’t allowed to leave, not even to use the bathroom.

Saket Soni, who received the workers' call, was familiar with the conditions under which the Indian guest workers had been living. Some of the laborers had bemoaned their living conditions during a meeting at a nearby church a week before, a gathering which Soni had attended along with leaders from several other immigrant rights groups.

At the meeting, workers complained they had been tricked by American and Indian recruiters operating in India, who had lured them to the US with false promises of green cards, good wages and comfortable living conditions. Workers said Signal was unresponsive to complaints about wages, discipline and housing.

Lal, 39, describes the horror of realizing that he was about to be deported. He'd sold everything and couldn't bear the thought of returning empty-handed to his wife and two young children. He says he left a good job to come to America and felt he'd rather die than be shipped back.

Lal attempted to kill himself by slitting one of his wrists with an industrial cutting tool. He was later taken to a nearby hospital and treated for his wound.

The workers were finally released into the care of community groups after pressure from Soni and other activists. Lal and Jacob remain in a tenuous legal status today. The two men are not allowed to work in the US on their current visas, and say they can't return home for fear of the loan sharks who financed their passage and the disappointment of their family.

Calling **RAW STORY** from an undisclosed location, in legal limbo, Lal deeply regrets the pain the news of his suicide attempt brought to his family.

"My daughter told me, 'Daddy, just come home, we don't care,'" he said.

Signal camp manager John Sanders confirmed in a phone interview that the company raided the workers' quarters and detained them in order to deport them. He asserts the six workers were fired for performance-related reasons and disruptive behavior, not for complaining to outsiders about conditions.

On paper, H-2B workers are supposed to have the same rights as Americans. In practice, however, companies can fire foreign workers without cause and deport them without any restitution of wages lost or fees paid to a recruiter.

Some workers told **RAW STORY** that they had spent their life savings to get to America and the threat of losing their ability to recoup what they have already invested is a very strong deterrent to speaking out.

Signal's guest workers are paid \$18.50 an hour, a comfortable wage in India. But the amount can pale in comparison to the sums they borrowed to get to America.

Signal's Indian recruiters promised the workers \$18.50/hr for first class welders, dispatching staff to test the applicants in India. All the workers who traveled to the US passed Signal's tests. However, after their passage, Signal tried to cut the wages of some Indian laborers from \$18.50 to \$13.50/hr or in some cases less. Signal says that it cut wages because the workers didn't have first class welder skills.

Jacob says the company tried to make about 30 people sign papers to cut their salaries. If they didn't sign, the threat of deportation hung over their heads.

Sanders confirmed that Signal tried to cut a number of workers' wages. He added that Signal wanted to cut some laborers' pay to \$9.50 but the firm's lawyer said it wasn't legal. The firm had certified to the Labor Department under penalty of perjury that workers would be paid at least \$13.50, the prevailing Mississippi welding wage.

Forced to sleep in windowless trailers

Jacob, who was once employed as a foreign laborer in Saudi Arabia, said the conditions at the Pascagoula "man-camp" were the worst he'd seen in his long career. Lal agreed.

"24 people in a windowless bunker," he said.

Signal refers to its windowless trailers as "bunkers." According to the [Mississippi Press](#), the local daily, Signal has 13 such trailers. A reporter from the *Press* toured the facilities with Sanders after the incident, writing that it revealed "cramped living conditions, but not the squalor described."

"The beds are large enough for a man of average height to sit upright," the article said. "The rooms have a total of two toilets and five showers."

Several days later, in [an editorial](#), the *Press* likened the windowless trailers to a "college dormitory," blaming workers for the mess.

"The bunk houses, which sleep 20 to 24 men, are cramped and reminiscent of a college dormitory," the paper's editors wrote. "The only messes found inside them were those created by the workers – mostly clothes, food containers and beverage containers."

The *Press* is published by Advance Publications Inc., which owns a slew of local newspapers and magazines across America – among them, the *New Yorker*.

In charge of even the most intimate aspects of workers' lives, Signal insists it did everything possible to make life more comfortable for workers while keeping costs in check.

But Jacob says Signal “tried to take away the drinking water because they accused workers of stealing spoons from the mess hall.”

Sanders disputes the charge. He says the company took the camp’s filtered water coolers away because workers were using the water to wash themselves after using the toilet instead of using toilet paper, a contention Jacob denies.

Sanders said the coolers were reinstated after workers agreed to “police themselves.” The company, however, has not reversed its decision not to replace metal spoons that disappeared from the mess hall.

“When there was a spoon shortage, we said, ‘We provided spoons once. It’s up to you to get new spoons.’ We’ll give them sporks. We’ll provide plastic.”

“Most eat with their fingers anyway,” Sanders added.

Both workers say that they approached Sanders several times and asked to move offsite. They were willing to room together, so they calculated they could get by on \$500 per month for housing, instead of the \$35 a day they were paying Signal. According to the workers, Sanders refused to allow the men to move off-site.

Sanders confirmed that workers are required to live in the camp in order to cover the facility’s fixed operating costs of \$2-3 million per year.

Signal manager says they followed US officials’ advice

Sanders said Signal was just following the advice of immigration authorities when it delivered the surprise dismissals and detention prior to deportation.

“We were just trying to follow what [they] had told us,” he said. “They said don’t tell them ahead of time because they will run away.”

“Only tell them the day of [the dismissal],” he added. “Sequester them.”

RAW STORY’s calls to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement were not returned.

Signal’s workers aren’t the only Indian employees caught up in the H-2B visa system. Patricia Ice, a staff attorney at the Mississippi Immigrant Rights Alliance, says her group is working with a separate group of approximately 200 Indian H-2B visa-holders in Mississippi. These workers, also pipe fitters and welders, are working on oil rigs in the Gulf of Mexico.

These men tell very similar stories, explains Mark Massey, a Pentecostal lay preacher and worker’s rights advocate. Massey has spent nearly a decade

helping Indian H-2B workers, first in his native Oklahoma and later in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Florida.

In emails and phone conversations with **RAW STORY**, Massey recounted stories of skilled workers who spent everything they had, only to find that the jobs they were promised didn't exist or had dried up, or that greedy recruiters had hired so many extra workers for the bounty fees that there wasn't enough work to go around.

Jacob's case is typical. He made contact with Dewan Consultants in India, then met Louisiana attorney Malvern C. Burnett and Mississippi sheriff's deputy Michael Pol. Jacob says his payment was divided between Dewan, Burnett, and Pol's company Global Resources. At first, he was promised permanent residency through an American company called J&M Associates, but after waiting 2 years, he was told that his previous application had been canceled and that he would have to go through Signal and pay even more money.

Workers have little protection

Approximately 66,000 H-2B visas are issued every year. As far as the U.S. government is concerned, the H-2B process begins with the Department of Labor. The Labor Department is responsible for certifying that an employer needs temporary workers and that the employee's wages will be at least as good as the prevailing wage in the area.

There are few, if any, regulations about what recruiters can promise workers before they arrive, and guest workers often find living conditions and wages are not as they had been promised. Under temporary one-year visas, they have little legal recourse.

Peggy Abrahamson, a spokeswoman for the Department of Labor, confirmed that the Department has little power to arbitrate in disputes involving H-2B employees who were brought to the US under false pretenses.

The Department "only has so much power to adjudicate" between workers and recruiters, she said. "Beyond that, the worker has to sue for general breach of contract."

Mary Bauer, an attorney at the Southern Poverty Law Center and author of a report on foreign worker conditions in the US titled "[Close to Slavery](#)," says workers have "virtually no way to assert their legal rights."

"When they get here, they are completely dependent upon their employers," Bauer said.

Bauer explained that while H-2B workers are technically covered by wage protections, it's practically impossible for them to sue, because they're poor, isolated and only in the US for a few months.

"There aren't a lot of lawyers willing to take these cases [pro bono]," she said.