

# Indian workers in US suspend hunger strike after 29 days

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A group of Indian workers seeking action against a US company for alleged exploitation have suspended their hunger strike after 29 days with a rally in front of the US Justice Department.

The workers, who were on a water-only hunger strike near the Indian embassy in Washington, also wanted to be allowed to stay in the US till an inquiry against their former employers, Signal International, is completed.

The New Orleans Workers' Centre for Racial Justice, which is supporting the strikers, said they suspended their hunger strike after an unprecedented outpouring of support from US Congressmen and leaders from labour, civil rights, and religious communities.

"Congress passed the Trafficking Victims Protection Act because we recognised that modern day slavery exists and that workers trafficked into the US should be able to place their faith in the US justice system," Democratic Congressman Dennis Kucinich was quoted as saying at the rally.

"Today, we must make sure we don't betray their faith in us."

Indian Member of Parliament SK Kharventhan (Congress) also pledged his support to the workers after flying from India to meet them and attend the rally.

"This issue needs to be taken up as an international crime in India. I pledge my support to you. Meeting with you personally has opened my eyes to the seriousness of the problem and the fact that the Indian government should help you bring the traffickers to justice," he said.

"After 29 days, we are suspending a hunger strike that has brought us more power than any group of H2B guest workers in the United States has ever had," said Sabulal Vijayan, an organizer with the Indian Workers' Congress, an affiliate of the New Orleans Workers' Center for Racial Justice.

"We have the confidence to suspend our hunger strike today because we have faith in these allies to fight alongside us until the traffickers are brought to justice," he said.

The striking workers were part of a group of 500 who came to the US on H2B visas to work for Signal International, a marine and fabrication company in Pascagoula, Mississippi.

The workers claim they were brought to the US on a false promise of permanent residency and were forced to live under inhuman conditions, a charge denied by the company.

They filed a complaint in the district court of Louisiana in March.

Apart from the Louisiana hearings, the Department of Justice also launched an investigation into the case in March shortly after more than 100 Indian employees of Signal walked away from their jobs.