

Indian 'guest workers' begin hunger strike in Washington

by [Becca Milfeld](#)

May 14, 2008

WASHINGTON--Hindi chants rolled out against the backdrop of folk music coming from another demonstration further down Pennsylvania Avenue.

"Awaaz do! Hum ek hain!" Shout it out! We are one!

The group of about 25 Indians was demonstrating against the guest worker program that had brought them to the United States with a temporary visa that they say is fraught with opportunities for abuse.

The demonstrators had congregated in front of the White House to support five of their peers who were about to begin a hunger strike.

The hunger strikers say they will demonstrate in front of the White House for three days, for three days at the foot of the Mahatma Gandhi statue in front of the Indian Embassy and for five days at the Capitol.

The protestors said they were representing more than 550 guest workers who migrated to the United States Gulf Coast in late 2006 under similar conditions. They claimed they had been forced to live 24 men to a trailer, for which they were charged \$1,050 a month. When they began to organize, they said, armed guards seized the organizers, threatening next-day deportation.

Hunger striker Sony Sulekha, 37, was working for a company in Dubai when he saw an ad in the paper offering permanent U.S. residency, he said through a translator.

He signed up, paying \$20,000 to the recruiter. Sulekha said he had no idea that he was coming to the United States on a temporary basis, and when he got here, he said the conditions weren't good.

"I've been in two other places before I came here, but I've never had an experience as bad as I've had since coming here," he said. Sulekha had hoped to help support his mother, two brothers, wife and then-infant daughter with his new job.

Sulekha said he and the other workers were employed by Signal International, the shipbuilding company. The Southern Poverty Law Center filed a class action lawsuit on the workers' behalf in March.

The company, when asked to respond, referred the reporter to previously issued press releases.

"The vast majority of the workers whom Signal recruited has been satisfied with the employment and living conditions at Signal and hope that Signal continues this program," the company said in a March 6 press release.

"Unfortunately, a few of the workers whom Signal had sponsored for the H-2B visas and recruited have made baseless and unfounded allegations against Signal concerning their employment and living conditions.

The company said it "has recently received information of fraudulent recruitment activity abroad in Signal's name in the recruitment of foreign nationals" and was cooperating in investigations by law enforcement authorities as well as halting participation in the guest worker program for the time being. Signal International also forwarded a letter from the Department of Justice Civil Rights Division declining to pursue the Indians' complaints on the grounds that "there is insufficient evidence" of a violation.

Low-skill, nonagricultural workers such as those who had gathered on Wednesday, can enter the country on a temporary basis under an H-2B visa. The government currently issues 66,000 of these per year.

While the matter is being investigated, the Indians are asking for the right to stay in the country. In the meantime, five former guest workers will be sitting across from the White House, stomachs empty.