

THE MISSISSIPPI PRESS

Guest workers walk out at Signal

Friday, March 07, 2008

By BRAD CROCKER

PASCAGOULA -- More than 100 Indian guest workers at Signal International quit their jobs Thursday, alleging they are victims of human trafficking and poor living and working conditions.

Nearly 300 workers from India staged a similar protest outside the Pascagoula shipyard last March. As it did last year, Signal, in a prepared statement Thursday, vehemently denied the "baseless and unfounded" allegations against its Pascagoula and Texas shipyards where workers from India were hired.

Many workers said they spent between \$15,000 to \$20,000 each after recruiters with India-based Dewan Consultants promised them green cards and permanent residency in the United States through the U.S. Department of Labor's H2B visa guest worker program.

After chanting "Indian worker congress, long live" and "We don't need Signal" in their native tongue, the workers stood about 100 yards from the shipyard's main gate and tossed their hard hats into the air before boarding a bus to leave Pascagoula.

Stephen Boykewich with the New Orleans Workers Center for Racial Justice, a group that organized with workers, said the workers will report themselves as trafficking victims and demand that federal officials further investigate the allegations and prosecute and stop further recruiting.

Pascagoula police sent two officers to the scene, but no violence or confrontations occurred.

Kurian David said he was a foreman in the Middle East when he saw the advertisement and was told to see recruiters in India. While awaiting his flight from Bombay to come work at one of Signal's two Texas shipyards, David said the Dewan recruiters threatened to hold his passport if he did not sign H2B documents. He said he was expecting green card and residency verification but was told "in the U.S., it's going to turn into permanent residency" -- promises other workers said they received as well.

Like other workers, David said he sold his home to pay his way into the program.

"I have no home in India anymore. If I go back to India, I'm homeless," David said at a news conference in Moss Point held before the workers' shipyard demonstration.

In its statement, Signal said it sponsored the workers' temporary visas through H2B to supplement its labor force in Pascagoula and Texas diminished by hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

Signal spent more than \$7 million to construct the living quarters at both shipyards that contained "galley and mess facilities fully catered with Indian cuisine, laundry and washing facilities, as well as recreational facilities with big-screen televisions, pool tables and computers with Internet access," the statement read.

About 290 of the 500 Indian workers at Signal were originally hired at the Pascagoula shipyard. The company said "the vast majority" of workers has been satisfied with both working and living conditions "and hope that Signal continues this program." None of those workers were available for comment Thursday.

An investigation by The Mississippi Press last year revealed cramped quarters, but no squalid conditions or signs of mistreatment workers alleged.

Boykewich said the workers staged Thursday's demonstration because they were afraid of organizing at work and being detained by the company, allegations workers also made last year after they said they confronted Signal officials about their conditions. They claimed the company used armed guards and deportation threats to snuff out organization by workers last year, allegations the company denied.

Signal said since the initial allegations last year, the company's employment practices and facilities have been inspected by representatives of the U.S. Labor, Homeland Security and State departments and Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

The H2B employees, Signal's statement added, "are paid in excess of the prevailing rate for their skills and they receive the same pay and benefits" as other Signal employees.