

We are under watch, say workers

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Indian workers on a satyagraha to protest inhuman work and living conditions say they have been subjected to secret surveillance and harassed by US immigration authorities.

The nearly 100 workers are marching from New Orleans to Washington DC to bring their grievances against US firm Signal International Co to the attention of authorities.

The workers say they saw a suspicious man photographing them on Friday as they left the Civil Rights Memorial Center in Montgomery. When the workers' advocates confronted the man, he became aggressive and refused to identify himself, though another member of an Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) surveillance team identified him as an ICE agent.

A third agent, who identified himself as head of Alabama ICE Mickey Pledger, arrived and suggested that the workers had been under covert surveillance from the launch of their journey in New Orleans last Tuesday. "Just because you don't see us doesn't mean we haven't been there," he is reported to have said.

The satyagrahis refused to be intimidated, marching through Montgomery for several hours after the encounter.

"Alabama ICE's attempt to intimidate human trafficking survivors as they walk in the footsteps of US freedom fighters is unconscionable," said Saket Soni, director of the New Orleans Workers' Center for Racial Justice. "We expect Ambassador Ronen Sen to demand that US immigration authorities call off secret surveillance and other actions that have an obviously terrifying impact on survivors of trafficking."

The workers were granted refuge in an Atlanta church by a Black Baptist pastor. "Make no mistake about it: these workers are victims of a system of modern-day slavery," said Reverend Timothy McDonald III, chief pastor of First Iconium Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia.

"Reverend McDonald drew a lakshman rekha around us to protect us from rogue immigration officers," said Alliance of Guestworkers for Dignity member Hemunt Khuttan. "Our satyagraha is not an immigration issue. It is a fight for human rights."