

Workers sue US firm, India cracks down on recruiters

The 120 workers who walked out of Signal International facilities in Mississippi last week rallied outside the office of the lawyer, who acted as a recruiter to bring them from India to the United States.

"The reason we gave up our homes to come here was to get permanent residency," said Vijaka Kumaran, 34. Kumaran sold his wife's jewellery to get the \$15,000 he was charged to go to the US.

The H2B workers complaint alleges that recruiters conspired with Signal to control the workers with "a broad scheme of psychological coercion, threats of serious harm and physical restraint, and threatened abuse of the legal process." The workers attempted to present lawyer Malvern Burnett with a federal lawsuit filed in a district court in New Orleans that names two recruiters and Signal as defendants and accuses the companies of human trafficking.

The 82-page complaint claims the defendants violated their rights besides violating nine federal laws. It claims they violated Trafficking Victims Protection Act by having both forced labour and trafficking. They also claim violations of the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organisations Act, the Civil Rights Act of 1866, the Klu Klux Klan Act of 1871, fraud, breach of contract, violation of the Fair Labor Standards Act, the Civil Rights Act of 1866 and false imprisonment, assault and batter and infliction of emotional harm.

In India, the government suspended licences of two Mumbai-based recruiting firms hiring Indian workers for Signal International, accused of ill-treating workers in Mississippi. Minister for Overseas Indian Affairs, Vayalar Ravi told Hindustan Times, "Licences of Dewan Consultants and S Mansur & Company have been suspended. The report of Indian ambassador in the US is expected in two days time". The government move comes two days after the HT reported the inhuman living conditions of 120 Indian workers in a small town in Mississippi.

Besides Mumbai-based Dewan Consultants, another Mumbai-based recruiter, S Mansur & Company, was carrying out the recruitment process for Signal by allegedly charging \$15,000 for a visa — a charge proprietor Syed Mansur Razvi denied. "I am allowed to charge just Rs 10,000 for processing an application. The Ministry should have questioned me before suspending the licence," Razvi said.

The Ministry has issued show-cause notices to both the firms, asking, "why action should not be taken against them for charging money from innocent people to illegally send them abroad to work in inhuman conditions and also for enticing them with the promise of green cards", sources said.

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The workers' litigation team includes attorneys from the Southern Poverty Law Center, the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund, and the Louisiana Justice Institute. Tushar Sheth, an attorney working on the case from the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund, said the march was a "phenomenal demonstration of worker unity and worker strength."

J Rosenbaum, an attorney from the Southern Poverty Law Center, spoke with crowd, saying the plight of these workers would be represented by her organisation.

"We're proud to stand with them in this litigation and their calls for investigations," she said.