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From
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To
Members of Parliament

Sub: Expressing Our Concern and Solidarity with the Plight of Indian Workers on Hunger Strike in the USA and Expressing Our Anxieties regarding the Dangerous and Diplomatic Silence of the Indian Government on this issue

Madam/Sir,

We are a labour rights organisation working among unorganized workers. We work to raise labourer's issues and give them necessary support and help. As you can guess we are interested in the deplorable conditions of the recent victims of labour trafficking from India to US.

Indian workers who were recruited to work for Signal International in the US, have been on hunger strike in Washington DC, to get justice for the fraud and injustice committed against them. The two main states that the workers come from are Kerala and Tamil Nadu.

Hundreds of guest workers from India have been working and living in slave-like conditions at a shipyard in Pascagoula Mississippi owned by the company Signal International. Signal is one of the employers that, after Katrina, has used the United States' "guest worker" visa program (H-2B) to import cheap labour. About 600 workers were recruited, more than half from Kerala. Rest are from Punjab, Delhi, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. They paid from \$15,000 to \$20,000 to Indian and American recruiters who defrauded them with promises of green cards and permanent residency in the United States. They sold their homes and became debt-ridden just to get the visa.

At Signal, they were forced to live in company trailers, 24 men packed into each, isolated from the world. For this, the company took \$1,050 a month from their paychecks. Their visas prevented them from working for any other company and left them in the constant threat of deportation. Some of the workers attempted to organize for their rights. In response, the company sent armed guards into the camp while they slept and took the organizers away at gunpoint. They were locked in a room and told they would be deported. In desperation, one of them attempted suicide by slitting his wrist.

The workers have been fighting for their lives for the last three months in the United States. Several workers, organized as "Indian Workers Congress", have been on hunger strike since 14th of this month. They have been on hunger strike in front of the Indian Embassy to show their protest against the Indian Government's negligence of the issue. It is critical and appropriate for

the Indian Embassy in the US to communicate with the Department of Justice to grant the workers “Continued Presence” so that they can fight for the justice they deserve, without fear of detention and deportation. But, the Indian Embassy appears not to respect the hunger strike; instead, it organized cultural programmes in the Embassy while ignoring the hunger strikers outside.

The family members of the workers conducted a solidarity hunger strike in Kerala to lend support to their loved ones and to urge the Indian government to act to protect its own citizens.

The workers’ families met with the Kerala Chief Minister and with State Minister for External Affairs, Mr. E. Ahmed. Mr. Ahmed said that the Minister for Overseas Affairs, Mr. Vayalar Ravi, has to take primary responsibility. P. Karunakaran MP (Lok Sabha, Kasaragode, Kerala) had raised the issue in Lok Sabha during Zero Hour on 28th of April. Sebastian Paul MP (Lok Sabha, Ernakulam, Kerala) contacted the family members of the victims. The issue has also been discussed with Chandran Pillai, MP (Rajya Sabha). Majority of the workers are from different parts of Kerala.

We are writing to you so that as MPs from Tamil Nadu, a state from which workers have also been recruited, you can help the workers’ struggle for justice.

We have contacted the Ministry Of Overseas Indian Affairs and urged them to intervene in this issue and take necessary steps to resolve this serious problem immediately. But, the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs and the Indian Ambassador have not responded and humiliated the workers and their family members by not recognizing their hunger strikes.

The workers are on the third week of hunger strike and some workers are in critical condition. We strongly believe that you would understand the desperation of the workers and their families – each worker had to pay \$15000-\$20000 to licensed recruiters who played with their lives. The workers sold their belongings and took loans in a desperate attempt to get employment. They did this out of economic desperation and also for false promises that they believed to be true. Now they have nothing.

The hunger strike of the brave workers is a cry for recognition and protection from their own government.

Since the intervention in this issue requires confronting the US government, the Indian government is not taking any concrete measure to resolve the issue. Intellectuals, Trade Unionists, Human Rights Activists and general public in US as well as India have given lots of support and help to the cause. In India, national and regional dailies are following and covering the issue closely.

Demands of Indian Workers Congress and their families:

1. Government of India impress upon the Department of Justice in the US to grant “Continued Presence” to the Indian workers in the US so that they can fight their case from there, legally, without fear of deportation and detention.

2. Government of India communicate in writing to the US Department of State that they are seriously concerned about the prosecution of Signal and US recruiters through due process of law, and intends to monitor the prosecution to ensure effective justice.

We urge you to pressurize the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs, the Indian Ambassador, Ministry of External Affairs and the Government of India to take concrete actions to resolve this issue immediately.

Kindly find the documents and press clippings which would give some more information on this issue.

We request you to sign in a letter to Mr. Vayalar Ravi, Minister of overseas Indian Affairs, demanding his office's immediate intervention in this issue.

Thanking You,

Arathi PM