

May 23, 2008

Indian Guest Workers Solidarity Congress  
c/o Society for Labour and Development  
5L, Shahpur Jat, 1<sup>st</sup> Floor  
New Delhi 110049

Mr. Vayalar Ravi  
Minister for Overseas Affairs  
New Delhi

Respected Mr. Ravi,

We are writing to follow up on our last meeting with you on May 15<sup>th</sup> on the urgent matter of the Indian hunger strikers in Washington DC. As they enter the 10<sup>th</sup> day of the hunger strike, their numbers have doubled and four workers are begin hospitalized due to their dangerous health condition.

At our last meeting, you had expressed to your solidarity with the unfortunate condition of the workers, as a trade unionist and as the Minister for Overseas Indian Affairs.

You had promised to communicate the workers' demands to the Indian Ambassador in the US and urge him to take appropriate action.

Since then, the workers have received no response from the Indian Ambassador and in fact, were humiliated by his lack of recognition of the hunger strikers even as he conducted a public cultural event at the Embassy in plain view of them.

**Present scenario**

On Saturday, May 17, hundreds of American visitors who lined up outside the Indian Embassy for its first-ever official cultural day were met with the sight of Indian hunger strikers growing weak on the fourth day of a fast to protest their government's failure to support their quest for justice against a US-Indian labor trafficking ring.

Hundreds of American visitors and passersby came to speak with the workers and offer their support. Many expressed shock that the workers had been abandoned by their own government and driven to risk their lives with a hunger strike. Many also signed a petition supporting the hunger strikers' demands: protected status for the workers to let them participate in a criminal investigation against the traffickers, a Congressional investigation into abuses of the guest worker program, and Indian pressure on the US to protect future workers.

“We feel strong because in our hearts, we know our cause is just,” said hunger striker Paul Konar. Muruganantham Kandhasami, another hunger striker, said, “We know the US is a powerful country, and we know that Signal is a powerful company. That is why we are asking the Indian government to support us as we stand here with our lives shattered.”

United Food and Commercial Workers International VP Michael Wilson, said in support, “Nine score and 15 years ago, a great president—a great Republican president—signed the Emancipation Proclamation and ended slavery—but not indentured servitude. These workers are our brothers. Their fight is our fight. Congress should insist the Department of Justice take action. These workers shouldn’t have to wait for another Emancipation Proclamation for justice.”

AFL-CIO General Counsel Jon Hiatt, announced the support of the AFL-CIO: “The AFL-CIO and its 10 million members are proud to support the hunger strike by these Signal workers. For decades, the AFL-CIO has been fighting against so-called guest worker programs, programs that are in reality indentured worker programs. These courageous workers have clearly shown us that the H2B program is a template for exploitation, and that we need to work together to expose the abuses of the program.”

The number of hunger strikers has doubled even as four of them are being hospitalized. The situation is grave and we are extremely concerned about the workers’ health as well as the negligence of the Indian government.

### **Urgent Attention**

We are shocked at the lack of response from the Indian government. We would like to know what your office has done since our last meeting and why there has been no response from the Indian government.

The workers are demanding that

- The Minister of Overseas Indian Affairs communicate with the US Department of Justice to secure for the workers, Continued Presence under the US Trafficking Victims Protection Act so that they can participate in an ongoing investigation into their case by the Department of Justice.
- The Indian Ambassador communicate to the US government to ensure the same, and with the US Congress to hold a hearing on the abuses by Signal of H-2B visas.
- US Congress hold a hearing on the abuses by Signal of H-2B visas.

The workers are the citizens of India. We expect your office, the Indian Ambassador and the Indian government to protect its own citizens – be they professionals and business people or workers who face grave injustice. We would like to discuss with you the actions that the Indian government is taking in this situation.

Sincerely,

Rajiv Agarwal, Advocate and Trustee of Society for Labour and Development

Anannya Bhattacharjee, International Organizer of Jobs with Justice US-India, and Trustee for Society for Labour and Development

Arathi PM, Campaign Coordinator for Society for Labour and Development