



### **NAPAWF Supports South Asian Immigrant Workers**

WASHINGTON, DC - On Monday, March 31, nearly 100 South Asian immigrant workers marched to the White House protesting inhumane living and working conditions and publicizing the dark underbelly of the U.S. [guest worker program](#). Chanting "All the way to the White House!" and "We want justice!" the workers, along with their supporters, gathered in front of the White House and demanded a Congressional investigation of their former employer Signal International, a marine construction company that held them in forced labor and is already the subject of a criminal human trafficking investigation by the Department of Justice. The workers arrived in D.C. after a nine-day [satyagraha](#) or "journey for justice" from New Orleans that drew wide support from clergy, organized labor and African-American and Asian-American community leaders.

The workers are part of a group of over 500 South Asian welders and pipe fitters who paid approximately \$25,000 each in travel and immigrations fees to recruiters in India and the United Arab Emirates after being assured that the company would help them become permanent residents of the United States. To pay these hefty fees, many of the workers sold their homes, took out large loans, and sold family jewelry. Upon arriving in the U.S., however, the workers found themselves at Signal International on ten-month temporary H-2B "guest worker" visas working in Gulf Coast shipyards under deplorable conditions. While the company claims that it recruited the workers to supplement a strained labor force in the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, we believe the company's brazen deception and exploitation of the guest workers reveals a more calculated intent to engage in human trafficking. The workers were forced to live and work in inhumane conditions only to be confronted with heavy-handed psychological and physical intimidation by their employers if they dared to speak out.

"Guest workers" in the United States are routinely brought to the U.S. under deceptive advertising schemes claiming high wages and permanent legal status. Unlike U.S. citizens, guest workers do not enjoy the basic protection of a competitive labor market - the ability to change jobs based on mistreatment or other factors. Instead, H-2 visas holders are bound to the employers who "import" them. If guest workers complain about abuses, they face deportation, blacklisting or other retaliation methods. Workers under this program are often trafficked to the U.S., isolated and held captive by their U.S. employers with little connection to the families and the lives they left back home.

Unfortunately, the compelling stories of these brave workers reflect the reality of too many immigrant workers who come to the U.S. in pursuit of an increasingly elusive "American dream." The H-2 guest worker visa, administered by the U.S. Department of Labor, has created a system ripe for exploitation of immigrant workers both in their home countries and in the United States. The workers' assertions are the latest in a series of complaints about the mistreatment of foreign laborers in the Gulf Coast after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Previous complaints have involved Latino hotel and construction workers and farm laborers and have centered on low pay and harsh working conditions. Widespread abuses by employers also occur in traditionally female dominated sectors, including the garment and domestic worker industries where Asian and Pacific Islander women comprise a significant source of low-wage labor. The combination of a broken immigration system, lack of enforcement of fair labor standards, and a singular focus against sex trafficking as opposed to all forms of human trafficking, contribute to the market for forced labor and the accompanying exploitation of immigrant workers.

As an organization grounded in human rights principles, NAPAWF believes that individuals should be free from oppression and violence; there should be a guarantee of economic opportunities for all people; and individuals should have the right to self-determination and self-sufficiency. To this end, NAPAWF fully supports our South Asian brothers in their brave fight for justice. NAPAWF also strongly condemns Signal International's exploitative business practices and joins the many and diverse voices calling for a full investigation into the company's violations of domestic and international human rights and labor laws.

NAPAWF recently released a report on the disproportionate impact of human trafficking on Asian and Pacific Islander women and girls. For more information on NAPAWF's position on human trafficking, please visit [www.napawf.org](http://www.napawf.org) to access our newly released report, *Rights to Survival & Mobility: An Anti-Trafficking Activist's Agenda*, and other materials.

For more information on the "journey for justice," please contact [SAALT](#) (South Asian Americans Leading Together).