

**"Like pigs in a cage": Katrina guest workers fight 21st century slavery in Mississippi**  
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More than 100 guest workers carrying signs that said "I Am a Man" and "Dignity" walked off the job at a Mississippi shipyard last week to protest conditions they liken to slavery.

The shipyard workers, who are from India, have filed a class-action [lawsuit](#) [PDF] against Pascagoula, Miss.-based Signal International, one of the largest marine and fabrication companies in the Gulf of Mexico. The suit also targets recruiters in the U.S., India and United

Arab Emirates, as well as New Orleans immigration attorney Malvern Burnett and the Gulf Coast Immigration Law Center.

Filed in federal court in the Eastern District of Louisiana, where many of the defendants are based, the suit says that in the wake of Hurricane Katrina more than 500 Indian men were trafficked into the United States through the federal H2B guest worker program to work for Signal at shipyards in Pascagoula and Orange, Texas. Lured by promises of permanent work and a chance at legal immigration, the men gave up their jobs in India and went into debt to finance fees as high as \$20,000 each. They then allegedly had their passports and visas held by recruiters who told them that changing their minds about working for Signal could bring legal action and even physical harm.

Once in the United States, the men were forced to live in guarded, overcrowded and isolated labor camps, the suit charges. After several of the plaintiffs spoke out against conditions in the Pascagoula camp, Signal security guards allegedly tried to forcibly deport them. One of the workers -- Sabulal Vijayan -- became so distraught by the threat of deportation that he attempted suicide and had to be hospitalized. The guards locked three of the other men in a room for several hours, refusing to provide them with water or bathroom access. The abuse left Signal's immigrant workers terrorized, the suit says:

Deeply fearful, isolated, disoriented, and unfamiliar with their rights under United States law, these workers felt compelled to continue working for Signal.

Filed by the [Louisiana Justice Institute](#), [Southern Poverty Law Center](#) and the [Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund](#), the suit charges the defendants with violating the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act, the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act, the Civil Rights Act of 1866, and the Ku Klux Klan Act of 1871, among other laws. Five of the plaintiffs are also bringing individual claims of false imprisonment, assault, battery, and infliction of emotional distress. The workers are also asking the Department of Justice to investigate. Signal [says](#) the charges are untrue and that most of its guest workers are satisfied with their living conditions.

During last Thursday's walkout, the workers threw their hardhats over the fence in protest as they left the shipyard and sang "We Shall Overcome." Saket Soni of the [New Orleans Workers' Center for Racial Justice](#), who served as an interpreter, said the workers talked of living "like pigs in a cage."

"The U.S. State Department calls it 'a repulsive crime' when recruiters and employers in other parts of the world bind guest workers with crushing debts and threats of deportation," Soni says. "This is precisely what is happening on the Gulf Coast."

*(Photo by Ted Quant courtesy of [neworleans.indymedia.org](#). To see more images from the protest, click on the previous link or the photo above.)*

This article can be viewed online at: <http://southernstudies.org/facingsouth/2008/03/like-pigs-in-cage-guest-workers-fight.asp>