



## **national network for immigrant and refugee rights**

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### **\*\*\*\*NEWS RELEASE\*\*\*\***

For Immediate Release – June 10<sup>th</sup>, 2008

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## **Communities around Country Organize Actions To Support Indian Guest-Workers' Hunger Strike Against Trafficking and Modern-Day Slavery**

**(Washington, DC)** On June 11<sup>th</sup>, 2008, hundreds of workers from India who were trafficked to the post-Katrina Gulf Coast in 2006 with H2B visas, a U.S. guest-worker program, will hold a rally and press conference outside the Department of Justice in Washington, DC to demand that the Attorney General grant them “continued presence” under the Trafficking Victims Protection Act. Communities and organizations around the country will also organize various local events and actions on that day, to support the Indian workers’ demands and challenge the use of guestworker programs.

The Indian workers, who were recruited by force, fraud and coercion by a U.S. company – Signal International, LLC – were sold false promises of well-paid and secure construction jobs. They were also led to believe they could bring their families and build new lives in the U.S. Each of them paid recruiters US\$20,000 for these dreams, selling their homes and plunging their families into debt, only to arrive into an American nightmare.

The workers were held in forced labor, cramped into tiny living quarters with 24 men to a small room. They faced constant threats and humiliation by their employers.

According to Saket Soni of the New Orleans Workers Center for Racial Justice who helped organize the workers, “When we started to organize the workers last year, Signal sent armed guards to the labor camps at the break of dawn. They pulled organizers out of beds, imprisoned them on company grounds, and attempted to deport them. 300 workers went on strike to demand the release of their captive organizers.”

A year later, the workers escaped from their labor camps and convinced Congress to agree to hold a hearing this year to investigate Signal's criminal trafficking practice, and the use of guestworker programs in the Gulf Coast. They were also able to pressure the Indian government to hold criminal proceedings against the recruiters in India.

On May 14<sup>th</sup> this year, the Indian workers launched a hunger strike in the tradition of Mahatma Gandhi, to demand that they be granted "continued presence" under the U.S. Trafficking Victims Protection Act, to avoid the ongoing threat of deportation by the Department of Immigration, Customs and Enforcement (ICE). The workers desperately need this protection to be released from the continued terror of deportation and to safely participate in the federal government's investigation.

On June 11<sup>th</sup>, the workers will hold a rally and press conference outside the Department of Justice in Washington, DC to demand that the Attorney General grant them this critical legal status.

On the same day, in cities across the country, various communities and organizations will organize actions and events to support the Indian workers' demands and to challenge the use of guestworker programs in the U.S. According to Colin Rajah of the National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, "Guest-worker programs around the world have become a means for exploiting immigrant workers as cheap and disposable labor to maximize corporate profits. Workers who are funneled into such programs as the H2B program in the U.S., often have to pay exorbitant fees to their recruiters, and then forced to work in sub-human conditions with the threat of firings, deportation and abuse if they refuse. Large companies are working in cahoots with the government in denying immigrant workers equal treatment and their rights as workers and as human beings."

Aside from Washington, DC, actions and events will be held in:

- Boston, MA
- Chicago, IL
- Knoxville, TN
- Los Angeles, CA
- New York, NY
- Portland, OR
- Providence, RI
- Richmond, VA
- Salt Lake City, UT

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