

Petition against Denying Mr. Clean Workers U Visas

Posted on October 17, 2015 by Cindy Hahamovitch

Labor scholars and activists everywhere are writing to demand that Leon Rodriguez, Director, United States Citizenship and Immigration Services, to reverse his decision to deny the Mr. Clean workers U visas, allowing the company to continue holding them in a condition of unpaid servitude.

To sign the petition, please email Cindy Hahamovitch, cxhaha@wm.edu with your name (and title, if any).

To: Leon Rodriguez, Director, United States Citizenship and Immigration Services

We, the undersigned scholars and other concerned citizens, are writing to demand that you reverse your decision to deny the Mr. Clean workers U visas. U visas would allow these victims of involuntary servitude in the US to remain here and bring a lawsuit against the company that trafficked them to the United States using fraudulent promises and held them in unpaid servitude in violation of the 13th amendment to the constitution.

The US government granted the cleaning services company Mr. Clean authorization to bring workers from Jamaica to Florida's Emerald Coast on H2-B guestworker visas. The workers, therefore, were guests of the United States. This is how they were treated: promised forty-hour workweeks and furnished apartments, they paid \$2,000 each to the owner of Mr. Clean, and flew to the U.S. at their own expense. They arrived in Destin, Florida, to find that were expected to sleep on the floor of completely bare apartments already crowded with other guestworkers, each of whom was paying \$300 a month in rent. There were no furnishings, sheets, towels, dishes, nothing, though together the workers were paying \$5,000 to \$6,000 a month in rent. No one got anything like forty hours of work a week either. Mr. Clean used several crowded apartments as informal hiring halls from which the company selected only a few workers each day.

At the end of each fortnight, the workers received checks for only a few dollars each, in some cases for no dollars. Some received handwritten notes indicating the amount they

owed Mr. Clean. There's a name for that: involuntary servitude or **slavery**.

You might say they were free to quit but under the H2-B system, workers cannot leave one employer for another. Quitting and leaving meant becoming undocumented immigrants. When six of the Jamaicans complained to the employer, all the workers received a memo warning them that anyone who did not show up for work would be immediately evicted, reported to immigration authorities, and taken to the airport for deportation with an Okaloosa County Sheriff's Department escort. The workers thought they would be arrested, beaten, even killed.

Despite their fears, six of them decided to fight back. They got help from the National Guestworkers Alliance, applied for U visas (witness visas that would let them stay in the US to bring a case against their employer/recruiter), and, lacking authorization to work for another employer, began traveling the country telling their story, even appearing before a Human Rights Commission in New York City.

Now, a year later, they are facing deportation. Although you acknowledged that the workers were victims of involuntary servitude, you determined that they did not suffer "substantial abuse." We beg to differ; slavery is, by definition, substantial abuse.

We implore you to grant all Mister Clean Workers Deferred Action and give all Mister Clean workers the opportunity to prove they were harmed. Keep in mind that H2-B workers at Signal International, facing very similar treatment, received U visas, brought cases against their employer and recruiter, and, just two weeks ago, won a \$20 million settlement. Please protect working conditions for foreign and US workers by refusing to allow employers to threaten and deport whistle-blowers.

Sincerely,

Cindy Hahamovitch, Class of '38 Professor of History, The College of William & Mary, and
Past President of the Southern Labor Studies Association

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Author



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Cindy Hahamovitch