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## Imported labor rights at heart of dispute

Mexican welders walk off the job, find they can't work elsewhere

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When 33 Mexican welders with permits to be in this country while working for a Channelview shipyard walked off the job earlier this month, they stepped into the heart of a debate over the rights of imported laborers.

The men say they are victims of a labor recruiter's bait-and-switch offer. When they arrived in Channelview, they say they found unsafe working conditions and lower-than-promised paychecks. So they went to work for another company in Mississippi.

And that is where the trouble started.

Federal officials say the men, all from the coastal state of Veracruz, were permitted to be in the United States, but only while working in Channelview for Southwest Shipyard.

If they had a complaint, they should have first contacted the Department of Labor, which they did not.

Southwest Shipyard had permission from the federal government to hire the Mexican workers after proving it couldn't find anyone in the Houston area to take the hot, sweaty and difficult job of welder for \$14 an hour.

"You can't put a big barge in an air-conditioned house," Carla Cotropia, a lawyer who spoke on behalf of Southwest Shipyard, said Thursday. "We have a lot of trouble finding enough people interested in the work locally. It is hot. It is Texas. It is August."

Cotropia said the workers were paid the going rate for full-time employment, along with benefits, and that although one worker suffered a minor electrical shock while on the job and another had a non-fatal heart attack, work conditions met safety standards.

She denied there was any abuse.

The Mexican government is checking the 33 men's claims and is awaiting a determination from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration regarding any possible safety issues, said Carlos Garcia, who is in charge of the protection department for Mexico's consulate general in Houston.

"A formal (consulate) investigation is under way," said Garcia, who added that each of the men, who are now believed to be at a shelter in New Orleans, have been interviewed separately.

The dispute points to the basic problem of having imported foreign workers who are not allowed the same rights as U.S. workers — including being able to quit a job and immediately look for a new one, he said.

"In some situations, they are basically modern-day slaves," Garcia said.

How much flexibility imported workers should have has been a major point of discussion as the United States considers whether to one day launch a much larger guest-worker program.

The workers' cause captured a larger stage this week when civil and immigration-rights advocates organized a news conference under the rotunda of the state Capitol in Jackson, Miss.

The workers said recruiters lied to them about how much Southwest would pay them and the working conditions.

The workers said that after relocating to Mississippi, they were confronted by a Pascagoula police officer and a labor recruiter and told that the labor recruiter was "their owner."

They said they were told that if they did not go with him, they would be deported for violating the conditions of their work permit, known as a visa.

They said police rounded them up, packed them in a local hotel and told them not to try and flee, according to a statement released by the groups.

"It is clear to us that the Pascagoula police department is in collusion with those contractors," said Bill Chandler, executive director of the Mississippi Immigrant Rights Alliance. "If they are forcing workers to move from one place to another against their will, that is kidnapping."

Eddie Stewart, Pascagoula's interim police chief, denied any wrongdoing and said his officers were merely responding to a labor dispute.

"These allegations are totally without merit. All we did was mediate a situation between two contractors," he said. "We did nothing — no arrests, no detainment — nothing at all."

The recruiting company declined to comment.

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