

News

June 7, 2016 9:59 PM

Immigrant workers win \$1 million in labor-trafficking lawsuits

GULFPORT -- Immigrant workers who said they were forced to be slaves after coming to Biloxi and other cities on work visas have been awarded judgments that total more than \$1 million.

By ROBIN FITZGERALD rfitzgerald@sunherald.com Twitter: [robincrimenews](#)

GULFPORT -- Immigrant workers who said they were forced to be slaves after coming to Biloxi and other cities on work visas have been awarded judgments that total more than \$1 million.

U.S. District Judge Sul Ozerden issued default judgments Monday against Royal Hospitality Services LLC in 20 civil cases. Individual payments range from \$67,000 to \$77,999.

The complaints of 18 other workers had been resolved in default judgments in December.

The 38 immigrants, mostly from the Philippines, had sought class-action status in a lawsuit filed in federal court in Gulfport on Oct. 28, 2011.

Ozerden considered each complaint separately.

The workers said Royal Hospitality, a labor-services business in New Orleans, violated fair-labor and human-trafficking laws.

According to the original lawsuit, the workers said the corporation had brought them to the U.S. on temporary visas for non-agricultural work and made them and their families overseas sign loan agreements to pay for their visas, a cost of \$5,000 to \$8,000. The workers had been led to believe the prospective employers would pay for their visas, the lawsuit said.

Forced to take out loans

The suit said the workers were told to hand over 12 post-dated checks plus 12 blank checks to make sure their monthly loan notes were paid.

The workers said their passports and visas were withheld. They said they received less than minimum wage and less than overtime pay, could barely afford to live, and were housed in

deplorable conditions. Some said they were housed in a bare trailer-trucks with no drinking water, food or furniture, not even a mattress.

Most were in Biloxi

A total of 22 of the workers were living in Biloxi when the original lawsuit was filed. Nine were living in Louisiana. The rest were living in states from California to Maryland.

The workers initially filed suit against 12 plaintiffs including the Beau Rivage LLC of Gulfport, Beau Rivage Resorts of Biloxi, and U.S. Opportunities LLC of West Palm Beach, Fla.

The workers later dismissed claims against all plaintiffs except for Royal Hospitality.

The corporation's attorney stepped down from the case, claiming Royal Hospitality hadn't paid legal fees and that the lawyer couldn't find the defendant, Ozerden wrote.

Ozerden had warned the corporation it had a deadline of June 20, 2014, to hire a new attorney or face a default judgement, documents show.

Royal Hospitality has failed to respond, Ozerden wrote.

Read more here: <http://www.sunherald.com/news/article82360347.html#storylink=cpy>