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US: Lawsuit accuses Connecticut nursery of human trafficking

by John Christoffersen, Associated Press
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A dozen Guatemalan workers filed a federal lawsuit Thursday accusing one of the nation's largest nurseries of engaging in human trafficking by forcing them to work nearly 80 hours per week, paying them less than minimum wage and denying them medical care for injuries on the job.

The workers, who filed the lawsuit against Imperial Nurseries in Granby and its labor recruiter, say they were promised jobs planting trees in North Carolina for \$7.50 per hour. Instead, they say they were taken in a van to Connecticut without their consent, had their passports confiscated so they would not escape and were threatened with arrest or deportation.

"These workers came here lawfully to earn a living and support their families," said Nicole Hallett, a Yale Law School student helping the workers. "Instead they were defrauded and trapped into conditions of forced labor."

The company referred a call seeking comment to spokesman Peter Hamilton. Hamilton said he was preparing a response and noted that the nursery had fired its labor recruiter some time ago.

Imperial's sales volume places it among the 20 largest landscape nursery growers in the country, according to the lawsuit.

The U.S. Department of Labor is investigating the allegations, a spokesman said. The workers were recruited last spring and early summer, according to the lawsuit, which accuses the defendants of engaging in human trafficking and a pattern of racketeering.

The workers were paid about \$3.75 per hour but also incurred substantial, illegal deductions which further reduced their wages, according to the lawsuit. The workers also incurred substantial debts in Guatemala to pay for their visas and trip to the U.S., according to the lawsuit.

Some of the workers flew to North Carolina, then were taken to Hartford in a small van. Some were forced to sit on the floor during the trip. When they arrived, they were housed in small filthy apartments and slept on the floors, according to the lawsuit.

The work involved preparing flowers, trees, shrubs and other plants to be sold to residential and wholesale consumers.

"I started to think the United States wasn't America but rather Egypt, a place of slavery,"

Marvin Coto, one of the workers, said through a translator.

Coto said he was forced to work in the fields in the rain when he had a severe fever. Other workers suffered back injuries.

"I got tremors from the fever, I'm shaking from the fever," Coto said. "I started crying and said you should let me go free. Every day they forced us to do more and more work. Our hands began to get swollen and they laughed at us and said you can keep working."

Coto, 33, said he eventually took refuge in a church, while other workers fled. Instead of sending money home, the workers said they wound up begging their relatives to send them money.

"My children in Guatemala didn't even have bread to eat," Coto said.

The lawsuit, which seeks back pay and damages, also names the recruiter, Pro Tree Forestry Services. Telephone messages were left for Pro Tree.

Pro Tree employees opened the workers' mail, prohibited them from riding city buses and restricted their travel, the lawsuit alleges.

The workers also say they were subject to verbal abuse, including being called "indíos", a racial epithet used to describe indigenous people of Guatemala.

The lawsuit contends the defendants knew or should have known that the labor contractor employed such techniques.

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