

Post-Katrina immigrant workers sue

They say they're being exploited

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NEW ORLEANS -- Immigrant workers recruited from South America and the Dominican Republic after Hurricane Katrina sued a prominent hotelier Wednesday, saying they are being exploited.

More than 80 workers from Peru, Bolivia and the Dominican Republic have joined the lawsuit filed in U.S. District Court against **Decatur Hotels LLC** and its president and chief executive, F. Patrick Quinn III. The workers are employed in housekeeping, maintenance and other hotel support jobs in New Orleans.

Mary Bauer, a Southern Poverty Law Center attorney who helped file the lawsuit, said workers were lured by recruiters in their home countries with promises of high wages and steady work.

They spent \$3,500 to \$5,000 for travel and other expenses, which Bauer said Decatur Hotels had yet to reimburse, and are being paid \$6.02 to \$7.79 per hour without the overtime pay they were counting on, she said.

"They are hugely in debt. They say, 'We would have not have come if we had known the truth,' " Bauer said.

Luis Lopez, a room service employee from the Dominican Republic, said he's spent most of the last two months without the work hours he was promised. His last paycheck was for \$18, far less than the \$500 to \$600 he expected to earn every two weeks or even the \$325 he would have earned on the job he left in his home country.

"They brought us here, and they don't even treat us like human beings," he said through a translator.

His wife, with whom he has three young children, is getting desperate as debt collectors swarm in and she can't buy food, Lopez said, crying as he held small photos pulled from his wallet.

Patricia LeBlanc, a lawyer for Decatur, said she had not seen the lawsuit Wednesday but the company's records indicate that all the foreign workers were getting satisfactory hours.

"We were satisfied and really happy with the foreign workers who came under the program," she said. "Workforce is a problem here, and we were happy with these workers."

The lawsuit against Decatur, which operates luxury hotels including the **Astor Crowne Plaza**, says the company abused the H-2B visa program. Employers obtain such visas by certifying that no one in the United States can do the work.

The visas, which typically are good for less than a year, tie workers to the employer, so a worker may not take employment elsewhere even if working conditions are not as expected, a provision Bauer says indentures immigrant workers.