

Written by
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By JOSEPH G. LARIOS

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CHICAGO (*JGLI*) -- Aside from failing to pay the 39 Filipino workers their promised wages, a Florida labor-recruiting couple did not provide “food and housing and denied necessary medical care causing workers to lose weight, be worn down, become ill and suffer from constant fatigue.”

On Friday, December 10, a United States District Court in Southern Florida in West Palm Beach sentenced Alfronso Baldonado, Jr. to 51 months imprisonment for forced labor conspiracy and his business partner, Sophia Manuel, to 78 months in federal prisons for forced labor conspiracy and false written statements.

Judge Kenneth A. Marra sentenced Manuel, vice president and operations manager of Boca Raton, Florida-based Quality Staffing Services, 60 months as to count one (forced labor conspiracy) and 18 months as to count four (false written statements) to run consecutively while Baldonado, president of Quality Staffing Services, was sentenced to 51 months in prison as to count one (forced labor conspiracy).

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Both Manuel and Baldonado were placed under supervised release for three years each.

While Manuel was assessed \$200, Baldonado was assessed \$100. Restitution hearing for the two is set on Feb. 18, 2011 at 9 a.m.

Manuel was originally charged with four counts, including Count two for Document Servitude and Count three for visa fraud. While Baldonado was charged with Count one for forced-labor conspiracy and count two for Document Servitude Conspiracy. Each count would have earned them a maximum of up to five years' imprisonment, three years' supervised release; and \$250,000 fine based on the indictment returned by the grand jury on April 22, 2010.

Boca Raton Residents

Both residents of Buttonwood Drive, Boca Raton, Manuel and Baldonado had conspired with the
Miami
DAR Workforce Solutions, U.S.A., Inc., a

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or North Miami, Florida-based labor-recruiting company registered with the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration and Placewell International Services Corporation, a private licensed labor-recruiting agency with offices in

Manila

and other cities in the

Philippines

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The scheme started from July 2006 lasted up to June 2008 from Palm Beach County in Florida when Manuel and Baldonado in concert with “others known and unknown to the grand jury” “did knowingly and willfully combine, confederate, conspire and agree with one another” “to hold Filipino nationals in a condition of forced labor” that cause “the person to believe that, if the person did not perform such labor or services, that person or another person would suffer serious harm or physical restraint” and the “abuse or threatened abuse of law or the legal process.”

The indictment said the “object of the conspiracy was to obtain a cheap, compliant, and readily available labor pool, using false promises regarding the terms of employment and pay to induce the Filipino nationals to incur significant debts to pay up front recruitment fees.”

The Filipino workers were also compelled to extend their labor and services “through threats to have the workers arrested and deported knowing the workers feared that arrest and deportation would result in serious economic harm and possible incarceration for nonpayment of debts.”

Filipino Workers Enticed with False Promises

Manuel and Baldonado tried to bring 50 workers from the Philippines to the United States under the federal seasonal and temporary H2B nonimmigrant program to work at country clubs and hotels.

The workers were enticed with false promises of high wages and two to three years of steady employment in the U.S. after paying substantial recruitment fees and airfare that forced them to incur substantial debts.

When the workers arrived in the U.S., their passports and visas were confiscated, limiting their freedom of movement. They were not allowed to leave their house to thwart their ability to seek help from others.

They did not have adequate food, housing, medical care and were "screamed at, scolded, and berated" causing them to be demoralized and scared.

They were threatened with arrest and deportation if they complained.

When Manuel held a recruiting meeting in the Philippines in July 2006, she collected \$1,500 job security deposit from each of the 36 Filipino applicants without returning them nor finding them employment.

Each job applicant was promised \$1,400 monthly salary plus \$10 an hour for overtime.

Placewell employes collected from the applicant \$4,000 each but was told to declare \$100 only to the U.S. Embassy in Manila and U.S. immigration officials when they entered the U.S.

The workers were scolded for eating food from the refrigerator without permission and were limited to "a diet of rotten vegetables, chicken innards and feet."

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When one of the workers slipped and broke his wrist while another felt stomach pain and was spitting up blood, they were denied medical treatment.

When one worker complained of drinking water, he was given muriatic acid, a toxic substance.

When 13 workers fled, Baldonado called “an unknown person” to “erase” those who absconded.

This case was investigated by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Homeland Security Investigations in Miami, Federal Bureau of Investigation; the U.S. Department of Labor - Office of Inspector General; the FBI; the U.S. Department of State - Bureau of Diplomatic Security; the Florida Department of Law Enforcement; and the Florida Office of the Attorney General.

This case is being prosecuted by trial attorney Susan French of the Human Trafficking Prosecution Unit, Criminal Section of the Civil Rights Division and Assistant United States Attorney Shaniek Maynard. # # #

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