

**For Immediate Release**

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## **Legal Team in Landmark Labor Trafficking Case Wins ‘Trial Lawyer of the Year’**

**Montreal, Quebec** – The legal team behind of the largest labor trafficking cases ever brought in the United States, resulting in a \$14 million verdict for immigrant workers was named winner of Public Justice Foundation’s ‘Trial Lawyer of the Year’ award during the organization’s annual gala last night in Montreal.

The suit, *David v. Signal International*, spearheaded by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), was against Signal International, a large contractor that recruited nearly 500 pipefitters and welders from India to help rebuild the Gulf Coast in 2005 following hurricanes Rita and Katrina. The recruits, who had to pay between \$10,000 and \$25,000 just to be considered for the work, were lured by the promise of long-term jobs and permanent residency in the United States. In reality, however, workers were brought into the country on guest worker visas which provided no opportunity to change jobs or pursue permanent residency. They were then charged \$1,050, deducted each month from their pay, in exchange for living quarters known as “man camps,” where as many as two dozen workers were forced to live in a single trailer and share one bathroom. These squalid living quarters became known among Signal agents as “the reservation.” All the while, the company was saving more than \$8 million in labor costs by paying Indian workers below-market wages.

SPLC, along with several public interest groups and pro bono counsel, fought Signal for nearly seven years. After a judge did not grant class action status to the case, SPLC recruited nearly a dozen of the nation’s top law firms and civil rights organizations to represent, on a pro bono basis, hundreds of workers in a dozen follow-on lawsuits in multiple jurisdictions. The *David* case was the first to go to trial, and more than a dozen lawyers helped craft a trial strategy that navigated numerous challenges, including explaining immigration law to jurors and presenting the testimony of workers who did not speak English. Their perseverance resulted in a unanimous jury verdict this year, finding that Signal had engaged in labor trafficking, fraud, racketeering and discrimination, and awarding over \$14 million in damages to the first five workers.

“The *David* case underscores the incredible impact a group of smart, dedicated attorneys can make in the lives of their clients,” said Paul Bland, Executive Director of Public Justice. “The case, which resulted in one of the largest verdicts ever obtained for trafficking violations, highlights why it is so important that our courts remain open to everyone. Powerful corporate interests are scheming to block the ability of workers and consumers to have their day in court because they know that with access to the courts, and to smart legal representation, their deplorable and abusive tactics will not stand. We’re proud to honor the legal team that made this victory possible, and to highlight the very real ways in which lawyers change lives, every single day.”

Leading the trial team was Alan Bruce Howard of Crowell & Moring in New York, along with Daniel Werner, Naomi Tsu, Kristi L. Graunke, Meredith B. Stewart and Anjali J. Nair of the Southern Poverty Law Center’s Atlanta and New Orleans offices; Chandra Bhatnagar, formerly of the American Civil Liberties Union in New York; Ivy O. Suriyopas and Dahsong Kim of the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund in New York; Joseph Bjarnson of Sahn Ward Coschignano & Baker in Uniondale, N.Y.; Tracie Washington of the Louisiana Justice Institute in New Orleans; Chiemi D. Suzuki of Crowell & Moring in New York; and Amal Bouhabib and Hugh Daniel Sandler, formerly of Crowell & Moring in New York.

For more information on the case and other finalists for this year’s award, including a short documentary video about each, visit [www.PublicJustice.net](http://www.PublicJustice.net).

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