

Investigation exposes abuse of foreign students on US work visas

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A recent Association Press investigation has uncovered an alarming trend of illegal exploitation and abuse of students from overseas seeking temporary work visas in the US. (See “Student visa isn’t a guarantee: Workers report abuses, squalor”)

Forced by poor conditions in their home countries, students are forced to accept seasonal jobs working in tourist destinations in order to make a living, sometimes earning less than \$1 per hour after living expenses and third-party fees are deducted.

Much like the conditions facing undocumented workers from Latin America, the J-1 Program is largely a racket in order to exploit the labor of workers and young people from poor areas of the globe.

Stories abound of students—oftentimes lured by promises of high pay or permanent residency in the US—being charged exorbitant fees for finding employment and lodging, living under wretched conditions and receiving low pay. These youth are also often the targets of physical and/or sexual violence.

The State Department, in an email to the AP, claimed, “The vast majority of participating students in this program find it a rewarding experience and return home safely.” However, the majority of the 70 J-1 Visa holders interviewed held negative views of their experience.

One student, working at a surf shop in North Carolina, was offered a room in the shop owners’ home for \$120 a week. She and fellow students living there were not allowed a seat at the owners’ table and were forced to eat food on the floor, among other abuses, while being forced to work grinding 14-hour shifts for no additional overtime pay.

Another, who for fear of her life would only identify herself as Katja, was forced to pay off \$35,000 demanded by her “brokers” after having her visa and

passport confiscated. Told, “You owe me the money. I don’t care how I get it from you. If I have to sell you, I’ll sell you,” Katja was forced to work at a Detroit strip club as well as submit to sexual advances by the men.

After two students from Belarus died in separate incidents and another was robbed, the government of the former Soviet republic has taken to officially warning any students traveling to the US about conditions prevailing there.

Though government auditors have warned of problems in the J-1 program for 20 years, little has been done to oversee the safety and rights of students. The State Department only began keeping a registry of complaints filed by students in late 2010.

While purportedly designed to provide work and educational opportunities to students traveling from overseas and promote cultural understanding, the J-1 Visa Program has developed into a boondoggle for unscrupulous employers.

The program has grown from nearly 20,000 in 1996 to a high of 150,000 visas in 2008, fueled by the relatively high demand for cheap labor and the ability to skirt requirements to pay Social Security, Medicare and other employment taxes. Students are required to obtain their own health insurance before arriving if they want to have medical coverage.

Reports of abuses of foreign students on work visas bear similarities to the experiences of migrant workers in the US on short-term visa passes. According to the New Orleans Workers Center for Racial Justice, Signal International LLC, a marine fabrication company, was responsible in 2008 for widespread abuses of several hundred Indian migrant workers it had hired on the H2B visa program. Sometimes forced to live 24 men to a trailer and charged upwards of \$1,000 per month for rent, workers were tied to their employers and

threatened with deportation in the event that they complained about their conditions.

In early November, a report from the Government Accountability Office (GAO) showed that in six of ten cases involving the H2B visa program, workers were systematically denied promised wages and/or overtime payments. One Louisiana-based company made nearly \$1.8 million by bringing 87 Indian workers into the country illegally.

Employers exploit such transient worker programs, pitting foreign students and workers against US workers, whose wages and working conditions are already under attack.



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