

www.chicagotribune.com/news/chi-ap-il-immigrantarrests-,0,3978409.story

chicagotribune.com

Immigrant workers sue staffing company

By SOPHIA TAREEN

Associated Press Writer

7:39 PM CDT, July 17, 2008

CHICAGO

A group of 10 immigrant workers filed a lawsuit Thursday claiming they were exploited by a staffing firm and several companies that employ temporary laborers at O'Hare International Airport.

The lawsuit alleged airlines and other companies used Ideal Staffing Solutions Inc. to benefit from "illegal schemes used to deny plaintiffs ... their earned wages thereby reducing labor costs," according to the suit.

The alleged "schemes" included not paying minimum wage and splitting weekly compensation into more than one pay period to avoid paying overtime.

"There's been this whole labor shift in the last 10 to 15 years of moving to temporary labor as these big companies ... try and shield themselves from the responsibilities for their workers," said attorney Jed Untereker with Working Hands Legal Clinic, which represents the workers.

The lawsuit, filed in Cook County, seeks thousands of hours of unpaid wages starting from 2003. The plaintiffs also seek class action status.

A telephone number for Ideal Staffing, based in Bensenville, has been disconnected.

The companies named in the lawsuit include United Airlines, Alitalia airlines, Singapore Airlines, Gate Gourmet Inc. and Swissport Cargo Services Inc.

"We've not reviewed this lawsuit and can't comment on the specifics," said United spokeswoman Robin Urbanski. "These workers are not and were never employees of United and we were not involved in their hiring. Most importantly, they were hired by Ideal Staffing which is a former contractor for one of our vendors."

John Bronson, a spokesman for Gate Gourmet Inc., said the company does not comment on pending



legal matters.

The other companies did not immediately return messages seeking comment Thursday.

In November last year, several of the immigrant workers filing the lawsuit were arrested at O'Hare in an Immigration raid. Immigration authorities rounded up illegal immigrants who allegedly used fake security badges to work in secure areas of the airport.

Two employees of Ideal Staffing were also arrested in the raid and charged with harboring illegal immigrants for gain, among other charges. A trial date has not been set in the case, said Randall Samborn, a spokesman for the U.S. attorney's office in Chicago.

Twenty-one of the workers arrested -- all were men -- were from Mexico and two were from Guatemala. Their Immigration cases are pending and several have already been deported.

The arrests were the result of an eight-month investigation by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Untereker said Thursday's lawsuit is separate from the federal criminal investigation stemming from the raid. He said Immigration status isn't relevant to labor law.

But he said the workers' status as immigrants is a factor in the lawsuit.

"The fact that they're immigrants, they're uniquely vulnerable to this type of exploitation," he said.

"Often times, there are language barriers, cultural barriers. They're not aware of their rights. Even if they are, they're not sure where to go."

Associated Press writer Carla K. Johnson in Chicago contributed to this report.

Copyright 2008 Associated Press. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten, or redistributed.