

<http://www.mb.com.ph/11-exploited-pinoy-workers-awarded-15-2m-in-us-human-trafficking-case/>

# 11 exploited Pinoy workers awarded \$15.2M in US human trafficking case

by [Roy Mabasa](#)

May 19, 2016 (updated)

Eleven Filipino bakery workers were granted \$15.2 million in damages and fees in a default judgment against the owners of L'Amande French Bakery in a human trafficking case filed before the Superior Court of California.

The lawsuit which was filed in March, 2015, by Asian Americans Advancing Justice-Los Angeles (Advancing Justice-LA) and Latham & Watkins LLP showed that the 11 Filipino workers were fraudulently lured by their employer to the United States on E-2 visas and then subjected to exploitative working conditions including labor exploitation, discrimination, unfair immigration-related practices, trafficking, and racketeering based on visa fraud, retaliation, and sought to enjoin ongoing unfair practices.

The E-2 visa provides temporary work authorization for immigrants with specialized or supervisory skills who are employed by a foreign national who has invested a substantial amount of capital in a US-based business.

The owners of L'Amande were identified as Ana Moitinho de Almeida, supposedly the daughter of a wealthy and powerful government official in the Philippines, and her husband Goncalo. The bakery also has stores in Beverly Hills and Torrance.

Based on the lawsuit, the Almeidas allegedly threatened their workers with “debt, deportation, and financial ruin” in the Philippines to maintain their economic exploitation of the workers while paying legally mandated wages to local workers.

After the workers arrived in the US, the Almeida couple allegedly threatened them with a significant debt of \$11,000 each unless they agreed to work under illegal conditions for at least three years.

After an investigation by the California Labor Commissioner's Office revealed egregious wage and hour abuses, including 14-hour work days for more than three consecutive months and wages of less than \$3 per hour, the Almeidas supposedly retaliated against the workers when they refused to lie about their working conditions.

Half of the workers who cooperated in the labor investigation were reportedly fired.

**SPECIAL IMMIGRATION STATUS**

Advancing Justice-LA said shortly after the lawsuit was filed, the Almeidas rapidly began liquidating their assets, including fraudulently encumbering and selling their million-dollar residence in Rolling Hills Estates, California, to keep the property and the proceeds from its sale from the workers. The workers amended the complaint to add fraudulent transfer claims. By August 2015, the defendants had fled overseas and instructed their lawyers to “take no further action in defending the lawsuit.”

In his decision issued on May 2, Judge Fernando M. Olguin of the United States District Court for the Central District of California granted all 12 claims from which the workers sought judgment and awarded the full amount of damages the workers prayed for.

The judge also voided the defendants’ fraudulent transfers and took steps to prevent them from further moving their assets. Advancing Justice-LA and Latham & Watkins are now pursuing steps to enforce the judgment.

“It is always an inspiration whenever individuals like the L’Amande workers gather the courage to stand up for their rights,” said Christopher Lapinig, Skadden Fellow and Registered Legal Services Attorney at Advancing Justice-LA, in a statement. “Unfortunately, time and time again, we see exploitative employers – often with the help of friends and family – resort to fraud and other unlawful activity to escape accountability for their labor abuses. With this judgment, we hope to make clear to such employers that they can no longer act with impunity.”

Advancing Justice-LA said it has already secured special immigration status for the workers as victims of human trafficking, which also provides work authorization so the workers can begin rebuilding their lives and reunite with their families.

Read more at <http://www.mb.com.ph/11-exploited-pinoy-workers-awarded-15-2m-in-us-human-trafficking-case/#IOB3GzjMOHtJeoFz.99>