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# Clausen: Modern-day slavery a troubling reality

[Todd Clausen, Staff writer](#) 9:03 a.m. EDT April 30, 2015



(Photo: Todd Clausen/@ToddJClausen/Staff photographer)

## Story Highlights

- Labor trafficking is a growing concern among local unions and leaders.

They work on construction sites and farms, in restaurants, hotels and perhaps at a mall kiosk or other areas.

Undocumented workers brought illegally to Rochester and other parts of the country to work as part of the underground labor trafficking industry is happening locally — and in plain sight, according to union leaders and others taking part in a recent panel at the Rochester Police Locust Club.

“It is right here in our neighborhoods,” said Mike Mazzeo, president of the police union, who wanted to get involved after officers stumbled upon a situation involving construction workers and didn’t know how to respond. “It is right here in downtown. We are next door to it and we need to raise awareness and work on it.”

Labor trafficking often involves the threat of physical violence for the purposes of involuntary servitude, something akin to modern-day slavery, and it’s difficult to uncover. U.S. Attorney William Hochul said there have been only three recent cases in our area, one involving the Grand Super Buffet Chinese Restaurant on Jefferson Road in Henrietta.

In that case, Zhou Wang Ni of Rochester was convicted in 2014 of harboring illegal aliens for commercial gain, Hochul said. Ni received three months of home detention, two years probation

and was ordered to pay a \$5,000 fine, although maximum sentences for labor trafficking can range from 10 to 20 years.

“The poor undocumented worker just gets abused,” Hochul said. “When you cross over into actual trafficking, which for us requires force, fraud or coercion against the worker, the workers themselves don’t become the target but the people that bring and hold them here. They usually involve some sort of threat directed against the worker.”

Labor trafficking may be a bigger problem in the area than the few cases handled by Hochul’s office, which is part of a task force created about nine years ago to work such cases.

[The Polaris Project is a Washington, D.C.-based group](#) that tracks cases and provides resources on identifying labor trafficking and how to handle it. The organizations reported that there were about 270 cases across the state last year, and about 76 cases logged through March of this year. Many victims, according to Polaris, [are trafficked in the hotel industry.](#)

Many cases go unnoticed, especially when firms from outside of the state are brought in to work on local jobs, said David Young of the Building and Trades Council/IBEW 86.

“If they get caught and they are not a state contractor, they bolt,” he said. “It is hard to chase them from one state to the next.”

Victims of these cases must not be ignored. Businesses, workers and others must be on the alert for children and adults being forced into these situations. State leaders have worked to pass tougher trafficking laws and know it’s up to everyone to be on the lookout for possible trafficking situations.

If the human element wasn’t enough, the loss of wages in local workers’ pocketbooks should be enough to raise more concern and awareness on the issue.

### **Indicators of labor trafficking**

The Polaris Project has a hotline to report cases of labor trafficking or to find help: (888) 373-7888. The organization also has posted some of the signs of trafficking, including:

- Prevented from taking adequate breaks.
- Doing different work than was contracted.
- Living and working on-site.
- Forced to meet daily quotas.
- Forced to turn over wages.
- Exorbitant fees deducted from paychecks, or paid in cash.
- Not paid directly.

*Source:* The Polaris Project

**Contact Todd**

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