

February 20, 2015

Joseph R. Bjarnson Successfully Provides Pro Bono Counsel for Indian National Plaintiffs Awarded \$14 Million Jury Verdict in Human Trafficking Case

UNIONDALE, NY — [Sahn Ward Coschignano & Baker, PLLC](#) has announced that Joseph R. Bjarnson, an Associate with the Firm, was part of the legal team that obtained a federal jury verdict of more than \$14 million in damages for five Indian national workers against Signal International, a marine and fabrication company; New Orleans lawyer Malvern C. Burnett; and India-based recruiter Sachin Dewan. The Indian national workers claimed that the defendants engaged in human trafficking, forced labor, racketeering and civil rights violations against them because of their nationality.

Since joining the Firm in 2012, Mr. Bjarnson has devoted hundreds of hours pro bono to this case, acting as lead counsel for the Firm. He began serving as co-counsel in 2010 with attorneys from the Southern Poverty Law Center, the American Civil Liberties Union, Crowell & Moring LLP, the Asian-American Legal Defense and Education Fund and the Louisiana Justice Institute.

The lawsuit contended that Signal and the other defendants forced the Indian national workers to pay money upfront on the promise that they would receive permanent U.S. residency. Instead, they received temporary H-2B guest worker visas, were placed in overcrowded and heavily guarded labor camps, and were subjected to a hostile work environment. When the guest workers began to organize and air their grievances, the company had the camp raided, forcefully terminating and deporting some of the guest workers as an example to the other workers.

During the course of the litigation, the defendants sought discovery requesting the plaintiffs' immigration status, but, in September 2013, U.S. Magistrate Judge Daniel E. Knowles held that discovery of such information may have an intimidating effect on the plaintiffs and other employees seeking to assert their workplace rights and issued a protective order over such information.

On February 18, 2015, a federal jury in the Eastern District of Louisiana returned a verdict in excess of \$14 million in damages to five of the workers. The landmark verdict is one of the largest civil jury verdicts in a human trafficking case in the U.S.

“We are extremely pleased with the verdict,” Mr. Bjarnson said. “Unfortunately, as this case shows, the guest worker visa program can be easily exploited and abused due to lack of adequate regulation and federal oversight. As a result, the defendants took advantage of this and cheated the workers out of their wages and, ultimately, their dignity. We hope that this verdict will prevent other companies from similarly exploiting and abusing the guest worker visa program and encourage guest workers that may have been mistreated to come forward and exercise their workplace rights.”

The plaintiffs in the case are Jacob Joseph Kadakkarappally, Hemant Khuttan, Andrews Issac Padavettiyil, Sony Sulekha and Palanyandi Thangamani.