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## The Louisiana Teacher Lawsuit

International recruitment practices of teachers and health professionals appear to share similar challenges. Recent allegations of misrepresentation, fraud, and abuse in the international recruitment practices of teachers to the United States have prompted advocates to call for the development of investigation and advocacy tools similar to the recent efforts surrounding the recruitment of healthcare professionals.

A group of teachers recruited from the Philippines to teach in school districts across the state of Louisiana have brought a class action lawsuit on behalf of more than 350 teachers against Universal Placement International, Inc., a Los Angeles-based recruitment placement company, its Philippines-based sister company, PARS International Placement Agency, the school systems that hired them, and the lawyers who acted as intermediaries. The civil action alleges violations of state and federal laws, including federal anti-human trafficking statutes and anti-racketeering laws.<sup>1</sup> The teachers filed the lawsuit with the assistance of the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), and Covington & Burling LLP.

According to the complaint, the teachers allege they were subjected to an ongoing scheme facilitated by Universal Placement International, Inc. and PARS International Placement Agency, of which the owners of the two companies are brothers. The teachers allege they were coerced into paying enormous, undisclosed fees and charges and were also subjected to intimidation, misrepresentation, and the illegal withholding of immigration documents when they attempted to challenge the actions of the recruiters. The teachers stated that they were solicited for recruitment under false pretenses and after signing the initial contract were regularly coerced into signing subsequent contracts obligating them to pay additional fees and legal charges and forcing them to forfeit a percentage of their wages.<sup>2</sup> When they attempted to resist, the teachers allege they were threatened with the revocation of their visas, termination of their work contracts, and told that retaliatory lawsuits would be filed against them. The teachers describe being trapped between two unacceptable options – paying increasing and continuing

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<sup>1</sup> Louisiana Federation of Teachers and School Employees. (2010). *Mairi Nuag-Tanedo, et al. v. Universal Placement International, Inc., et al.* Retrieved from: [http://la.aft.org/files/article\\_assets/44240394-E51E-05E5-1E84EADAD644C040.pdf](http://la.aft.org/files/article_assets/44240394-E51E-05E5-1E84EADAD644C040.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Toppo, G. and Fernandez, I. (2009, October 27). Federal complaint: Filipino teachers held in 'servitude'. *USA Today*. Retrieved from: [http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/education/2009-10-27-filipino-teachers\\_N.htm](http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/education/2009-10-27-filipino-teachers_N.htm)

fees in order to retain their jobs, or returning home to the Philippines with an insurmountable debt owed to the recruitment companies.<sup>3</sup>

The stories of this abuse originally came to light in 2009 when a group of Filipino teachers started a blog cataloguing their experiences. Information about the circumstances under which the teachers were being forced to work soon reached the American Federation of Teachers and the union stepped in and began advocating for them. At least one of the parish school districts, in response to early complaints filed by the teacher with the U.S. Department of Labor and both the Louisiana State Workforce Commission and Attorney General, agreed to reimburse the teachers in their schools a portion of the allegedly illegal fees and the same district set aside a \$400,000 fund in anticipation of paying future settlements.

On December 17, 2012, a California jury ordered Universal Placement International, Inc. and its owner to pay \$4.5 million to the 350 Filipino teachers for damages.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

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