WHAT IS THE NGA?
Hundreds of thousands of workers enter the United States every year on temporary visas through the U.S. guestworker program.

They work in critical industries, from landscaping to construction to education, in deeply exploitative conditions that frequently rise to the level of forced labor and involuntary servitude.

The National Guestworker Alliance (NGA) is a membership organization of guestworkers. Our members organize in labor camps across the United States to win collective dignity at work. We are building national power to win fairness in the terms of migration. We also partner with local workers—employed and unemployed—to strengthen U.S. social movements for racial and economic justice.

The NGA was formed as the Alliance of Guestworkers after Hurricane Katrina, when thousands of guestworkers were brought to the United States and subjected to forced labor. Guestworkers in labor camps across the Gulf Coast came together to fight collectively for their dignity.

Today NGA’s rapidly expanding membership is engaging in workplace fights across many industries to win dignified conditions, just migration policy, and new rights and protections for all workers.

WHO ARE GUESTWORKERS?
Guestworkers arrive from across the world to work in critical U.S. industries, including construction, welding, education, landscaping, and hospitality. They come to the United States because of the job crisis at home. Guestworkers are forced to choose between living with the families they love and providing for them.

In 2006, Daniel Castellanos arrived as a guestworker in post-Katrina New Orleans to work at Decatur Hotels. He plunged his family into debt to pay recruiters who promised him decent work at $10-15 an hour. He was paid as low as $6.02 an hour. He and his fellow workers were unable even to cover their living expenses in New Orleans, let alone pay down their debt or support their families back home. When Daniel organized workers into a campaign to hold the employer accountable, he was fired.

In 2007, over 500 pipeliners and welders were brought from India to Mississippi. Aby Raju paid recruiters nearly $20,000, relying on promises of good work, a green card, and permanent residency for his family. He was trafficked to the post-Katrina Gulf Coast, where he was held in forced labor by marine fabricator Signal International. He and other workers organized against deplorable conditions under the threat of deportation, and faced surveillance and retaliation from immigration authorities.

In 2009, workers from El Salvador, Peru, and Bolivia were lured to Louisiana. When they arrived, they were leased for profit to perform hazardous waste removal across the South, at job sites that included military bases, schools and public hospitals.

“I’ve known people in Mississippi that have even been assaulted [by their employers] and didn’t report it because they were so afraid of losing everything—their job, their visa, everything.”
- Ignacio Zaragoza, Mexico

U.S. Guestworker Program: Rules of the Game

1. Trapped in debt. Desperate for work, guestworkers plunge their families deep into debt to pay recruitment fees and visa costs, believing recruiters’ promises of the American dream.

2. Lured by false promises. When they arrive in the U.S., they learn that the promises were false. Instead of green cards, decent work, fair pay, and the American dream, employers subject guestworkers to deplorable living and working conditions.

3. Living and working under the employer’s complete control. Workers live in labor camps, often on company property. Their movements to and from work are controlled, and they are subjected to surveillance by their employers.

4. Tied to a single employer. Guestworkers are bound by law to a single employer, and cannot work for anyone else. If they leave that employer for any reason—even to escape exploitation and forced labor—they lose their legal status, and can be deported.

5. Facing retaliation for organizing. When workers organize to access their rights, employers retaliate. Workers face termination—and deportation into virtual debt servitude—in their home countries.

guestworkeralliance.org
While U.S. workers face extraordinary unemployment rates in a recession economy, employers receive the right to hire guestworkers by certifying to U.S. authorities that they cannot find U.S. workers to do the job. When guestworkers arrive, they become a captive workforce: employers use them to undercut local workers and drive down wages and the quality of working conditions. Employers also use the guestworker program to undercut the possibility of workplace organizing and unionization among U.S. workers. In the race to the bottom, guestworkers are at the very bottom—but all workers lose.

The NGA Vision

The NGA is working to ensure that:

1. Guestworkers have the power to transform their workplaces from exploitative to dignified—and have the consciousness and organization to do this in partnership with local workers locked out of employment.

2. Guestworkers have the power to transform the terms of migration, so that workers can arrive to the United States on a path to first-class citizenship.

3. Guestworkers are protagonists in a vibrant social movement to expand the right to organize for all excluded workers, reversing a long legacy of retaliation against workers of color who organize to win dignity and freedom.

"For too long the deck has been stacked against noncitizen workers. ... When one group of workers is powerless, all workers suffer.”

- New York Times editorial
April 22, 2010

"I personally gave about $20,000 to come to this country. I thought I was saving my parents and I would be able to live with my family here. But the experience I had after coming here was living like a slave.”

- Aby Raju, India

"All labor has dignity.”
- Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

"We have seen many abuses of guestworkers, and they have been increasing. Now they are at their worst point.”

- Edward Dahua, Peru
Recent NGA Accomplishments

In February 2010, NGA exposed collusion between immigration authorities and guestworker employer Signal International in a major case of labor trafficking across Mississippi and Texas. NGA revealed that immigration officials advised the company’s private deportations and collaborated with the company to retaliate against workers who organized.

In August 2010, NGA members escaped from labor camps in Tennessee to blow the whistle on a major state contractor, who was trafficking guestworkers with public money, including stimulus dollars, instead of hiring local workers.

“I asked the recruiter what the job would be. He said, ‘You’re on the H-2B visa. If the boss tells you to dance, your job is to dance.’”

– Isaac Salinas, Peru

“I spoke out because I wanted to be recognized as a human being.”

– Hilario Jimenez, Mexico

In March 2011, NGA won a vindication of five years of organizing, advocacy, and litigation when the Department of Labor proposed new worker protections in the H-2B visa program.

NGA and the New Orleans Workers’ Center for Racial Justice have pioneered successful federal and state legal strategies using labor, civil rights, and immigration law to defend guestworkers’ right to organize.

“We realized we were being used—used as cheap labor, and used to undercut the local American workers.”

– Miguel Angel Jovel Lopez, Mexico
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NGA is a project of the New Orleans Workers’ Center for Racial Justice (www.nowcrj.org).