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J-1 workers speak out on exploitative State Department labor program

written by Bayani
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“It all started with the sudden terminations of all J-1s,” said Mary Lee Philline Camello, calling in from Hot Springs, Va. “Instead of receiving termination letters, we were informed via phone call, video chat or from other coworkers.” On May 13,

the J-1 Workers Network held an [online press conference](#) with support from the National Alliance for Filipino Concerns (NAFCON) and Migrante USA.

The J-1 visa is granted to young workers from outside the United States who have been sponsored by U.S. employers to be placed in temporary jobs in industries like hospitality, retail and food service. Camello is one of the many J-1 workers who spoke about the challenges they face under the COVID-19 pandemic in the U.S.

These workers formed the J-1 Workers Network and launched the Support J-1 Workers campaign in response to the inaction and neglect from sponsoring employers and home and host country governments.

“Some of us still had three months left in our contracts,” Camello continued. “Some of us just arrived, and only were able to work for a week.” This leaves the J-1 workers jobless, having to spend their savings on rent, groceries and paying back the loans to their recruiting agencies — the same agencies that put them in this situation in the first place.

“We tried reaching out to our visa sponsors, and their only advice for us was to go home, or others got no response. We also tried reaching out to the Philippines Embassy, the host company and the community, but there was little to no support given.”

The J-1 Visa Exchange Visitor Program is overseen by the U.S. State Department, and is touted to “increase mutual understanding between the people of the U.S. and the people of other countries by means of education and cultural exchange.” In reality, it’s a way for U.S. employers to hire workers from overseas for far below the federal minimum wage without shouldering any of the costs of travel, housing or insurance.

These costs are passed on to the workers themselves: sponsoring employers and

recruiting agencies charge hundreds or thousands of dollars to register, which does not include the costs of travel, housing and insurance. These registration and sponsorship fees are completely unregulated and there is no limit to how much recruiting agencies can charge.

“We are liable to pay a program fee of \$5,500, which includes the \$500 registration fee, the fee for the sponsorship and the cost of health insurance,” said Jorizza Garcia, a J-1 worker living in Dallas, attesting to the fees charged by her recruiting agency. “[After the registration fee of \$500], we are given 3 to 5 days to pay the first payment of \$3,000 for us to get our training plan. If we cannot pay within 3 to 5 days, the process will be cancelled and no refund will be granted.”

After applicants pass their visa interview, they then have to pay the next \$2,000 within 3 to 5 days. If they do not, their process is cancelled without the possibility of a refund. Further, most contracts enforce a strict no-refund policy, even if the internship is terminated or the applicant departs the U.S. early.

Federally sponsored labor trafficking

The J-1 visa program is essentially a labor trafficking program, in which the State Department designates recruiting agencies to promise high pay, professional job training and opportunities for cultural exchange. Of course, the young applicants find these promises empty, and instead are paid less than minimum wage in menial jobs and forced to live in overcrowded housing with other J-1 workers.

And because so many of these workers accrue debt in order to pay registration fees, they are forced to stomach wage theft, discrimination, sexual harassment and human trafficking — after all, they’re not getting a refund if they leave the job placement, and have virtually no other recourse.

With neither recourse nor assistance from employers or governments, the J-1

Workers Network composed an open letter with the following demands:

“Given these conditions, we are calling on the Philippine government to:

1. Support us with financial assistance through its Assistance to Nationals program for rent, purchasing plane tickets and reimbursement for those who have already bought a plane ticket;
2. Provide legal assistance for taxes, immigration, labor rights and other areas of concern;
3. Investigate and prosecute recruitment agencies accountable for neglect and corruption; and
4. Declare cash bonds and post-dated checks unenforceable, and refund any cash paid.

“We demand our visa sponsors and recruitment agencies to:

1. Take responsibility for the well-being and safety of J-1 workers;
2. Communicate clearly and timely with us, instead of neglecting us;
3. Assure us of our program’s restarting or extension;
4. Provide a full refund of our program fee, all miscellaneous fees and provide receipts for all payments, if program was not completed or was suddenly terminated;
5. Provide damage compensation;
6. Pay us in the full amount written in our contract; and
7. Stop the harassment of J-1 workers and our relatives in the Philippines for payments.

“Finally, we call on the U.S. government to:

1. Provide assistance for J-1 workers victimized and abused due to discrimination; and
2. Protect J-1 workers during disasters and emergencies like the COVID-19

pandemic.”

To follow developments, visit and “follow” the [Support J-1 Workers Facebook page](#). Please [sign their petition](#) to show support.

