

AGRICULTURAL GIANT MONSANTO SUED BY MIGRANT WORKERS OVER PROMISED AGREEMENTS NOT MET



Monsanto, the agriculture giant, is facing serious discrimination accusations from a group of migrant workers from Texas. The workers are accusing Monsanto of underpaying them, to the extent that they did not get even the minimum wage. Moreover, they allege that they were put up in below standard poor housing, which they were misled into believing, would be free, but were made to pay for. Lead plaintiff Jose Cardenas said in a complaint filed with the federal court last week that he, along with seven of his colleagues, had come all the way from Hidalgo County, Texas, to Indiana in the summer of 2010, to work in the corn farms of the company. Their duties entailed de-tasseling, a process by which workers remove the pollen-producing flowers in one variety of corn so that a hybrid seed can be produced, sorting and husking corn. Monsanto is the country's leading producer of genetically modified seed. The jobs were arranged for them by a Texas based recruiter, Hermilo Cantu Jr. who assured them that there would be no shortage of work and that apart from the agreed-upon wage, other benefits would include free-housing for them and their families and kitchen facilities to cook their own meals. However, the workers say that the promises remained idle promises and were not adhered to. The recruiter had told them that the price that they would earn would be a piece-rate wage of \$80 per acre, but when they received their wages it not only worked out to much less than that but was even below the federal minimum wage of \$7.25 per hour. The complaint says that initially they were accommodated in a motel for which they did not have to pay anything but eventually ended up in what earlier was a nursing home, for which they had to pay \$300 per month in rent. The employer provided makeshift kitchen facilities by bringing in a school bus that had been outfitted with three or four stoves and a pair of refrigerators. It was not possible to cook within the cramped confines of the school bus. They described the kitchen setup as "substandard." Moreover it was insufficient for the entire workforce. The complaint reads, that the complaining workers seldom used the 'kitchen bus' because it was overcrowded and inadequate for all the workers. Moreover, two workers, Antonio and Irma Mena, said that were asked to share a room with insufficient beds for them and their three children. According to the complaint, "two or more" of the workers "suffered illness or injuries from suspected pesticide exposure" whilst working. Tom Helscher, a spokesman for Monsanto, said that although he was cognizant of a complaint being filed, he was yet to receive the complaint. Helscher sent an email saying that all the workers had received pay and benefits that were not only in accordance with the law, but also exceeded it. "Monsanto is committed to insuring that all seasonal laborers supporting our business receive the pay and benefits they are promised," he wrote. The recruiter Hermilo Cantu Jr. could not be reached for comments and a lawyer for the workers declined to say anything on the issue. The lawsuit has been filed under the Fair Labor Standards Act and the Migrant and Seasonal Agricultural Worker Protection Act. Agricultural companies like Monsanto depend heavily on migrant labor for work such as de-tasseling. More often than not, these migrant workers are Latinos from the Southwest of America and Mexico. In the last quarter Monsanto earned a net income of \$937 million. Based in Missouri it is the largest producer of genetically modified seed in the world, amassing sales of \$4.2 billion. Monsanto was saddled with a similar suit last year and similar claims of promised wages not being paid, substandard accommodation and promises of free housing not being met were made. The complaint was filed by 16 workers from Arizona. How much the company settled for was not disclosed. Whether it is a case of a complaint being filed by workers emboldened by this earlier precedent or is it a case that lessons from the last time around have not been learnt, only time will disclose.