

## Mississippi Shipyard Brings Recruits from India

Signal International, an oilrig construction and repair company with yards in Mississippi and Texas, has begun receiving 290 temporary guest workers from India to fill first-class welder and fitter positions at its Pascagoula shipyard.

More than 200 have arrived, according to company officials, with the remainder to come early this month.

The company cited widespread shortages in skilled manpower on the Mississippi and Texas coasts following hurricanes Katrina and Rita as the reason it decided to go outside the United States to recruit.

It used a federal guest worker program known as H2B, where the U.S. Department of Homeland Security issues a visa after a comprehensive background check of the workers, according to the company. Once granted, the guest workers may come to the United States and work for 10 months.

Dick Marler, president and CEO of Signal, said the company would likely need guest workers until the Mississippi Gulf Coast returns to normal.

Indian workers have been used elsewhere in the United States working in shipbuilding and heavy manufacturing and have a reputation for being pleasant and hard working, said Marler. "I believe they will contribute positively to the company's growth and to the local economy in Pascagoula."

Marler said, "We are fortunate that the U.S. government has such a program that allows us to supplement our work force during a time of emergency created by Hurricane Katrina."

During their stay in Pascagoula, Indian workers will be housed on-site at Signal in a facility constructed specifically for them.

The guest workers are on Signal's payroll as full-time employees. They receive the same pay as all other Signal craft personnel and are taxed similarly, according to the company. They also pay for their room and board during their stay with Signal.

Their company quarters include a cafeteria, recreation lounges, laundry and bunkhouse for sleeping.

Signal was hit hard from both the hurricanes and lost craftsmen in its two shipyards in Pascagoula and four shipyards in the Orange and Port Arthur area of Texas, according to company officials.

The company specializes in offshore drilling rig construction and overhaul or repair as well as heavy marine fabrication.

It was in a full hiring mode prior to Katrina and was attracting an adequate number of workers, the company said, but the hurricanes scattered the work force. The company found that lack of housing on the Coast and an abundance of opportunities to work for competing companies rebuilding the storm damaged communities and infrastructure made recruiting particularly difficult.

Signal continues to aggressively recruit local workers, the company said.

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