

Department of Justice
U.S. Attorney's Office
Eastern District of New York

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Wednesday, October 19, 2022

Former Manager of Long Island Catering Hall Sentenced to 72 Months for Forced Labor

Defendant Threatened Filipino Nationals with Arrest and Deportation

Earlier today, in federal court in Central Islip, Roberto Villanueva was sentenced by United States District Judge Joanna Seybert to 72 months in prison for his role in the forced labor conspiracy that took place at the Thatched Cottage in Centerport, New York. The defendant pleaded guilty to forced labor and forced labor conspiracy on February 5, 2020 and has been incarcerated since his arrest on December 10, 2017.

Breon Peace, United States Attorney for the Eastern District of New York; Michael Alfonso, Acting Special Agent-in-Charge, Homeland Security Investigations (HSI), New York; Jonathan Mellone, Special Agent-in-Charge, U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Inspector General, New York (DOL-OIG); and Patricia A. Menges, Director, United States Citizenship and Immigration Services, New York Asylum Office (USCIS), announced the sentence.

“Villanueva exploited his victims’ immigration status, promising them the American dream, but instead threatening arrest or deportation if they didn’t work 16 hours a day, often unpaid, sleeping on bug infested mattresses covered in garbage bags, without heat or hot water,” stated United States Attorney Peace. “This sentence highlights our Office’s commitment to bringing abusers to justice.”

“Villanueva knowingly manipulated these workers using bait-and-switch tactics to coerce and control them, forcing them to live in squalid conditions with a constant threat of physical harm if they failed to comply with his ever-escalating demands. Today’s sentencing sends a strong message that human lives are not commodities and these workers deserved dignity and respect. HSI is committed to working together with our partners to fight human trafficking in all its forms, including labor trafficking and exploitation to prevent abuses like this,” said Acting Special Agent in-Charge Alfonso for Homeland Security Investigations in New York.

“Roberto Villanueva abused the H-2B visa program by forcing workers to work long hours in occupations not approved by the U.S. Department of Labor, often for far less than the prevailing wage. Workers that complained were met with threats of physical harm and deportation. The U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Inspector General will continue to work with our law enforcement partners to vigorously pursue those who misuse worker visa programs for their own personal gain,” stated Jonathan Mellone, Special Agent-in-Charge of the U.S. Department of Labor OIG New York Region.

Villanueva formerly worked as a recruiter and manager for the Thatched Cottage. At his plea proceeding, Villanueva admitted that workers were brought from the Philippines to the United States on H-2B visas that expired shortly after their arrival. Once their H-2B visas expired, Villanueva coached workers how to apply for student visas by fraudulently representing that they intended to attend school full-time and had sufficient resources to support themselves during school.

Villanueva admitted that his actions were done in concert and agreement with Ralph Colamussi, the former owner of Thatched Cottage. Villanueva admitted that at times he deposited funds in the workers’ bank accounts to give the appearance of ample resources, and then withdrew the funds once

the student visas were approved. When workers objected to performing certain jobs, working consecutive shifts or not being paid promptly, Villanueva threatened to report them to the police or immigration authorities.

The government's case is being handled by the Office's Long Island Criminal Division. Assistant United States Attorneys Charles P. Kelly and Madeline O'Connor are in charge of the prosecution.

The Defendant:

ROBERTO VILLANUEVA
Age: 65
Huntington, New York

E.D.N.Y. Docket No. 17-CR-592 (JS)

Topic(s):
Labor & Employment
Immigration

Component(s):
USAO - New York, Eastern

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