



"My firm does farmworker cases throughout the state of California, and I have never seen housing that was this bad," said Mark Talamantes, who represented the workers. "But, to my clients' credit, they worked, and they worked, and they worked."

The eight workers are Agustin Gonzalez, Jesus Gonzalez, Hector Gonzalez, Nicolas Gonzalez, Juan Gutierrez, Miguel Maravillas, Fernando Sanchez and Luis Vasquez.

The Spalettas and their attorney could not be reached for comment Wednesday.

The lawsuit was filed in United States District court in San Francisco on April 28, 2002, alleging that the defendants withheld wages, refused to pay overtime, did not provide rest or meal time and violated the Employee Housing Act by operating an "unlicensed and uninhabitable labor camp."

Talamantes said the workers labored on the ranch at night and lived during the day in three mobile home trailers and one building. He said the walls and floors had holes in them, wires were exposed, and several windows were broken, so the wind blew right through the rooms.

Dairy waste flowed under the buildings when it rained, causing rat and insect infestations. In the winter, the trailers and cabin leaked, and mushrooms grew out of the carpets. During the summer, the rooms turned into virtual ovens because there was no insulation, Talamantes said.

He said the microwave ovens were so infested with roaches that they would often burn out after cooking so many bugs.

The eight plaintiffs finally got fed up and on Jan. 5, 2002, they complained about the living conditions and deductions for

housing costs taken from their paychecks, according to the lawsuit.

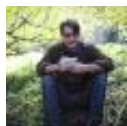
But instead of fixing the housing, Charles Spaletta fired the workers, Talamantes said. Five workers left immediately, he said, but three could not find any other place to stay, so Spaletta served them with eviction notices.

"I guess he didn't really appreciate the workers' complaining about the conditions," Talamantes said.

The eight workers filed a complaint with California Rural Legal Assistance in Santa Rosa, which referred them to Talamantes.

The money will be split among the eight plaintiffs and any of the 14 other workers who labored at the ranch over the past four years and can still be found, Talamantes said.

"There are probably many more cases where dairy farms are illegally housing workers," Talamantes said. "The purpose of this lawsuit is to compel dairy owners . . . to provide safe and licensed housing and also pay those workers."



Peter Fimrite

Reporter