

Date: 22th May 2009

Abusive gangmaster placed workers at a real risk of injury or death

A gangmaster's reign of abuse and exploitation is at an end after his licence was revoked for numerous serious breaches of workers' rights.

A Gangmasters Licensing Authority operation to investigate Sapphire Trading Ltd in Southampton uncovered persistent and systematic exploitation of vulnerable workers.

The operation involved unannounced inspections and in total took over seven weeks to complete because of the workers' reluctance to provide statements for fear of losing their job and their accommodation.

Sapphire Trading showed a wholesale and blatant disregard of the licensing standards. It was evident from the scale and the extent of the breaches that the gangmaster placed his workers at risk not only in the workplace but also in the accommodation that was provided for them.

The evidence uncovered in this investigation identified a persistent and systematic exploitation of vulnerable workers including:

- a three storey, eleven bedroom house had few fire doors, no evidence of fire extinguishers, the fire alarm turned off with the key removed and the rear exit was blocked placing workers at a real risk of injury or death.
- there was evidence uncovered that tended to show that workers were afraid of giving evidence to the inspector for fear of losing their jobs and accommodation.
- only one in ten properties inspected had a valid Gas Certificate
- none of the buses used to transport workers were registered as Public Service Vehicles (PSV)
- workers were not routinely given pay slips and had no National Insurance numbers and the workers were not registered with HMRC to avoid paying tax.
- deductions from wages for accommodation and transport were made without the workers consent and cash was taken directly from wages
- workers had not received pay for up to ten days
- payslips often contained false information; there was no credible evidence that Statutory Sick Pay was being paid to workers and no evidence that any scheme was in place to identify who was entitled to be paid under the scheme.

Paul Whitehouse, Chairman of the GLA said:

“It was for the bravery of the workers who suffered at the hands of Sapphire Trading Ltd in coming forward and making statements to the GLA that helped us to get this result. Other workers who are in a similar situation should take note and contact us we will always treat information in confidence and protect their identity.”

“Tell us where the problems are and we can do the rest. We have proved that we can shut down the rogues and there will always be work with the many legitimate gangmasters who treat workers with the respect they deserve.”

Notes to editors

1. A copy of Sapphire Trading Ltd’s unsuccessful appeal against the GLA decision, is available by contacting the GLA
2. The Gangmasters Licensing Authority (GLA) was set up to curb the exploitation of workers in the agricultural, horticultural, shellfish gathering and associated processing and packing industries.
3. The majority of workers involved in these industries come from countries such as: Romania, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, Lithuania, Latvia, Pakistan and Portugal.
4. So far, 1,230 labour providers hold a GLA licence. Ninety Three licenses have been revoked (8 with immediate effect).
5. The GLA stepped up its fight against those who abuse workers with the launch of Operation Ajax in June 2008. The operation was set up to increase the GLA’s activities with an 18 month programme of unannounced raids.
6. Paul Whitehouse, GLA Chairman, is available for interview by contacting 0115 900 8962
7. Anybody who is aware of exploitation should contact the GLA on 0845 602 5020 or report anonymously at www.gla.gov.uk/report

End

Public enquiries: 0845 602 5020

Media enquiries: 0115 900 8962

www.gla.gov.uk