



**For Immediate Release
October 4, 2007**

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Latina Workers Sue Travel Agencies for Gross Exploitation

Three Latina women have filed a federal lawsuit in the Eastern District of New York today claiming that their former employer, a New York chain of travel agencies, has repeatedly and illegally exploited them in their workplace. Represented by the Justice at Work Project of the New York Legal Assistance Group, the low-income plaintiffs cite numerous violations of the New York State Labor Law and the Fair Labor Standards Act, including denial of minimum wage and overtime benefits. Elena Goldstein, the attorney for the plaintiffs, explained that Jorge Aldaz, chief officer of Atlantic Travel and its city-wide chain of travel agencies and courier stores, has illegally exploited these women and other employees on a regular basis. She said, “Through this lawsuit we hope to gain adequate compensation for these three brave women and for similarly situated workers.”

The lawsuit is a collective action filed on behalf of the named plaintiffs as well as all other employees of Aldaz’s stores commonly known by the names of Atlantic Travel, Atlantic Courier and Travel Multiservice. As set forth in the complaint, plaintiffs were forced to work up to 68 hours each week and were subject to lengthy unpaid “training” periods. Plaintiffs were routinely denied minimum wage, overtime pay, and state law wage supplements. Indeed, one worker received a total of \$200 in compensation for working 63 hours/week for six weeks – about \$.53 cents for each hour worked.

Pilar Barrera, a named plaintiff in the lawsuit and a member of La Union de la Comunidad Latina (an immigrant-led organization working for economic justice in Sunset Park) states that she and the other workers “are simply seeking justice and want Mr. Aldaz to fulfill his duties as an employer.”

The lawsuit also cites Defendant Aldaz for retaliating against one of the plaintiffs for demanding her rights under federal and state law. Aldaz responded by promptly cutting her schedule – and her earnings – dramatically.

Goldstein explained, “These stores operate as retail sweatshops for educated immigrant women. Through this lawsuit, we hope to obtain the money owed to the plaintiffs as well as send a strong message to other employers who exploit immigrant workers that all workers are protected by the law.”

Founded in 1990, the New York Legal Assistance Group (NYLAG) is a not-for-profit law office providing free civil legal services to low income New Yorkers. A full service agency, NYLAG provides consultation, representation and advocacy. Last year, NYLAG handled 22,370 cases and impacted additional thousands through successful impact litigation and community legal education. In 2006, NYLAG launched the Justice at Work Project to consolidate and expand its employment law practice with an emphasis on immigrant workers. For more information on NYLAG, go to www.nylag.org.