



Workers Awarded \$1m Judgment: GBLS Says Money Is for Back Wages Due from Boston Hides and Furs

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By [Seth Daniel](#)

Workers allege that they were called 'dogs,' not employees.

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They allege that they were harassed when they used the bathroom, told demeaningly to use the toilet at their own 'casitas.'

They allege that they were refused any time to eat lunch, instead being told by the owners of Boston Hides and Furs on Marginal Street – the Andreottola family – to eat the animal skins that the workers lugged around for 60 hours a week.

And if those skins made them ill, they say Anthony Andreottola allegedly told them they would be thrown in the dumpster like 'dogs' or 'sick cows.'

They allege that they were humiliated, threatened with violence and insulted hundreds of times a day .

And in the end, what brought it all down was the fact that these workers weren't even being paid minimum wage for their

efforts – doing backbreaking work for an average of 60 hours a week and getting only \$300 for their labors.

For years, they bore the burden quietly.

Finally, last year, they went public despite the ridicule and threats that faced them and their families. The workers – most of whom are Chelsea residents – found a trio willing to stand up for them, and on Monday the U.S. Department of Labor, Greater Boston Legal Services (GBLS) and the Chelsea Collaborative announced that the Andreottola family had been ordered to pay just under \$1 million in back wages to those 15 workers at the unassuming tannery on Marginal Street.

“They worked in a constant atmosphere of intimidation, humiliation and fear for years,” GBLs Attorney Audrey Richardson. “The employers, specifically Anthony Andreottola, constantly threatened and humiliated these workers. They screamed at them, yelled profanities at them in English, Spanish and Italian. They would harass them when they went to the bathroom, knocking on the door and telling them to get back to work and take a [expletive deleted] in their own ‘casitas.’ They did this so that workers were afraid to go to the bathroom. When it was time for lunch, they were told they couldn’t have lunch and they were lazy – that if they wanted to eat, they could eat the animal skins and if they died from that, they would be thrown in the dumpsters like sick cows. They were referred to routinely as ‘dogs,’ ‘horses,’ or ‘dead cows.’ They were mocked and told that they were sick or handicapped if they went to slow. They were constantly mocked by being asked if they’d eaten their papusas that day – which is a type of food eaten by Latino workers.”

The alleged conditions laid out at the Monday press conference were far more shocking than even the historic settlement – which reached back an unprecedented four years and required a payment of \$925,000 to the 15 workers named in the complaint. The Andreottolas – who live in a home in Lynnfield – also had to pay a \$50,000 fine to the Department of Labor – making a total penalty of \$975,000. The settlement figured out to be two times the amount of back wages, plus overtime pay (time and a half) for four years. There was also \$100,000 awarded to 14 of the workers who were fired after an unannounced inspection last year of the tannery by federal officials. Typically, the Department of Labor can only go back two years due to the statute of limitations, but in rare, very serious, instances, they can get a waiver to go back four years.

This was apparently one of the more egregious situations that has been seen in quite some time, and a waiver was granted.

“I think most of us when thinking of working in this environment are horrified, which makes it all the more brave and courageous these workers came forward to tell their story,” Richardson continued. “I think we can all agree that the way Boston Hides and Furs did business was no way to do business and this is no way to treat fellow human

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beings and employees. We hope today Boston Hides and Furs learned its lesson well and any other employer who would treat their employees this way in order to profit should think hard about that. We hope everyone sees that engaging in this kind of exploitation and abuse is not only reprehensible, but also will have serious consequences as well.”

Many of the employees were present at the conference Monday, but Collaborative Director Gladys Vega said many were still scared to speak publicly due to the fact that they fear the Androttolas and members of their own families.

“Some workers may not join us here because they are afraid of retaliation,” Vega said. “Many of these workers still live in Chelsea and some of their own family members think what they did in coming forward is wrong. We stand for them here today. Today is an amazing victory. We want workers in Chelsea to understand they have rights and if we fight hard, workers will win. No matter who the workers are or where they come from, we will fight for them against exploitation.”

Monday’s settlement announcement was the culmination of an investigation that started in May 2012, but really had roots going back to 2005. The current investigation read more like a novel than an factory inspection.

On May 2, 2012, the Department of Labor made its first visit to the Marginal Street tannery. However, the owners had prior knowledge of the visit and were allegedly able to herd the workers into a nearby home and hide them as the inspection visit played out.

“They had a warning of the visit and the employer had workers hidden in a nearby home,” said Richardson. “The workers were ordered to stay in the house and stay quiet and away from the windows while the inspectors were there.”

While they passed muster on that visit, the Department of Labor wasn’t satisfied and returned in a surprise visit one week later. On that visit, they found several more workers who hadn’t been there before.

“On that visit the investigators were able to talk to the workers and discuss why they had been missing mysteriously one week before,” she said.

Two days after that visit, all 14 workers who had been hidden in the house were fired by Boston Hides and Furs without reason. All of fired workers and a 15th worker was added to the complaint as he was the one who originally called the Department of Labor and got the ball rolling.

That worker began to disclose what was happening at Boston Hides and Furs when he attended a worker training seminar at the Chelsea Collaborative in 2012. He began telling stories that completely shocked and horrified those in attendance, Collaborative workers said.

Finally, the workers agreed to come forward and lodge a complaint.

“It took enormous courage for these workers to come forward,” Vega said. “We had tried before, but they weren’t ready.”

That time before was in 2005 when Boston Hides and Furs came under the cross hairs of neighbors who complained of horrendous odors coming from the tannery and even animal parts and animal blood being left on the surrounding streets. The plant got in a measurable amount of trouble and had to change the way they ran their tannery.

They even briefly sponsored a Chelsea youth sports team to show they were on board with the community.

Collaborative members allege that it was likely just a facade.

Vega said they had observed and heard of horrendous worker conditions in 2005, and Collaborative members attempted to get workers to come forward, but it wasn't to be at that time.

"We stayed outside and watched the workers come out and then followed them to their homes," Vega said. "We talked to them about what was going on, but they didn't want anything to do with us. They weren't ready then."

The 15 employees will receive their first payments from the Andreottolas this coming Monday. The rest of payments will come in scheduled payments that end this coming January.

Vega said it is important to note that neither the Collaborative, nor GBLS, gets any portion of the money or any payment for their assistance in helping the workers.