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**HEADLINE:** Cuban trio win suit against Curacao firm;  
Cuban workers who accused a Curacao company of slave labor won their federal case by default.

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**BODY:**

Three Cuban dry-dock workers who sued a Curacao shipyard business for conspiring with the Cuban government and forcing them into virtual slave labor won their federal lawsuit Friday, after their former employers failed to show up in court.

In a joint venture with the Cuban state shipyard, Curacao Drydock Company hired at least 100 Cuban workers to repair cruise ships and tankers at its dock in Willemstad, Curacao.

Court records showed that instead of paying the men, the Curacao company applied their \$6.90 hourly value to the Cuban government's debt with the company.

**ESCAPED**

Alberto Justo Rodríguez, Fernando Alonso Hernández and Luis Alberto Casanova Toledo escaped and in 2006 sued the company in U.S. District Court in Miami under the Alien Tort Act, which allows foreigners to file civil suits in U.S. federal courts when a serious international law has been violated.

The men -- who now live in the Tampa area -- said the company made them work double shifts against their will in substandard conditions and kept their passports to prevent them from fleeing. On off hours, they were forced to watch hours-long videotaped speeches of then-President Fidel Castro.

U.S. District Judge James L. King ordered a default judgment against the Curacao Drydock Company because the company fired its Boca Raton attorneys, did not hire new ones, and failed to show up for court-ordered depositions.

According to King's ruling, the company "abandoned the case," so he ordered a Nov. 17 trial just to determine how much should be awarded to the three men.

Attorneys for the plaintiffs from the Miami firms do Campo & Thornton and Grossman Roth said they would request an amount in the "eight or nine figure" range.

Cuban trio win suit against Curacao firm; Cuban workers who accused a Curacao company of slave labor won their federal case by default. The Miami Herald August 9, 2008 Saturday

### **`HISTORIC'**

The lawsuit was considered significant because it offered a rare glimpse at employment terms normally kept secret between the Cuban government and the firms with which it does business.

Tens of thousands of doctors, trainers and other workers are dispatched around the world on behalf of the Cuban government, but how much they are paid is rarely publicized.

The dock workers were given per diems for food and paid an \$18 monthly salary that would be legal in Cuba but violated labor laws in Curacao.

"It really is a historic ruling," said Tom's Bilbao, executive director of the Cuba Study Group, an organization of Cuban-American business leaders who followed the suit. "It sends a message to any company that would conspire with the Cuban government to violate the human rights of Cuban workers and basically says, 'Look, you are on notice: there is now a legal precedent. If you conspire to do this, there will be severe consequences.'"

Company general manager Franklyn Asser did not return a telephone call seeking a comment. Stephanie Reed Trabant, the attorney who represented the company until last month, could not be reached for a comment.

### **`UNDER A ROCK'**

The plaintiffs' attorneys said the Curacao company tried to duck the case on a variety of technicalities, such as where the trial should take place. When those attempts failed, the company stopped appearing in court.

"When they realized there would be a day of judgment on the merits of this case, then all of a sudden they climbed under a rock," said Seth Miles, one of the workers' attorneys. "Either they are going to pay these men, or they are going to have a significantly difficult, if not impossible, time doing business in the United States. We will do everything possible to make sure of that."

### **`ECSTATIC'**

In court papers, the company denied that the men worked in inhumane conditions, but acknowledged holding the workers' passports for safe-keeping and applying their salaries to the Cuban government's debt.

Attorney John Andres Thornton said the plaintiffs will appear in court in November to tell their tales of suffering.

"Our clients are ecstatic," Thornton said. "They hope that this means that companies will think twice before entering deals using forced Cuban labor."

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