

## More Workers Join Suit Against Renaissance Salon

By Frances Moore

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Three more women have joined in the lawsuit against owners of the Renaissance Nail Corp., claiming unfair and inappropriate treatment of its employees.

Earlier this year, Maricarmen Andrade, Juana Torres and Irma Karina Vivar filed state and federal lawsuits against Renaissance Nail Corp., which has salons in New Canaan and Darien. Recently, Natalie Zavala Hernandez, Leticia Flores and Gloria Mastranzo added their names to the lawsuit.

Among the many allegations, the owners are accused of forcing Latina workers, in particular, to massage a male employer and male clients in the back room of the facility. The workers also allege that their employer touched them inappropriately.



All residents of the State of New York, the women claim that they were forced to work long hours without pay, did not receive overtime payment, had their tips withheld, enduring poor working conditions and subject to discrimination based on their race and/or ethnicity.

**Former employees and their supporters protest outside Renaissance Nail Salon in Darien regularly, asking customers to boycott the salon, which is in court facing allegations of unfair labor practices. (Amy Mortensen / Staff photographer)**

The lawsuit has also expanded to include more defendants. Originally charging Korean business owners Jennifer Kwon, Young Soo Kwon and Hyeon Lee, the suit now includes Renaissance Nail Salon Darien, Renaissance Nail & Spa, Boram Oh -- the current owner of the business, who reportedly bought it from Lee some time after June 2 -- and Chez Chelsea Inc. Chez Chelsea changed its name from "Chez Moi Inc." on Sept. 9.

The women were employed as manicurists, pedicurists, massage technicians and waxers at different times from July 1999 to as recently as August of this year.

The plaintiffs in the case are working with the National Mobilization Against Sweatshops (NMASS) "Justice Will Be Served" division, which represents service workers in these types of complaints.

"We're not lawyers. What we do is we organize workers," Yadira Alvarez, an organizer for NMASS, said in an interview this summer. "There should also be another way the workers should be able to put pressure on the bosses."

Also involved in the case is JUNTA for Progressive Action and Unidad Latina en Accion (ULA). The women have also retained the help of the Urban Justice Center and the law offices of Garrison Levin-Epstein Chimes and Richardson in New Haven.

According to the papers filed with the CHRO, the women routinely worked more than 60 hours a week, were given less than five minutes to eat lunch and were not allowed short breaks to use the restroom.

The suit also alleges that workers were fired when they requested time off, and were forced to work without protection from toxic chemicals, and as a result suffer from respiratory and skin problems. Other health complaints include back pain and kidney infections.

In addition to the sexual harassment charges filed against the Renaissance owners, workers are suing for restitution of unpaid overtime hours, unlawful deductions from their paychecks, minimum wage violations and tips that were withheld. They are seeking compensation for economic, physical and mental suffering.

According to NMASS, what makes this case unique is that this is the first time Latina women, who were transported from New York to Connecticut to work, have made this complaint. In the past, the New York City-based organization has received complaints from Asian workers in New York and New Jersey.

The paperwork filed with Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities (CHRO) states that the three women filing charges are New York residents who were allegedly transported by "a van owned by the defendants" from their homes in New York to Connecticut to work. "At all times relevant to this action, plaintiffs handled, sold, or otherwise worked on goods or materials that had been moved in or produced for interstate commerce," the suit alleges.

Alvarez said that complaints like this are common.

"The treatment across the industry is pretty much the same. They get no protection, no lunchtime, they're working up to 12 hours, they're taken from here to there," she said. "It's not an isolated case. It's a business. They're transporting people."