

Maine company sues federal government to keep skilled French worker on the job

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A Kennebunk industrial coating company is suing the immigration service and other U.S. government agencies over not renewing a work visa for a French employee who the company claims has unique expertise in the company's processes.

Northeast Coating Technologies filed the lawsuit in federal court in Maine on Friday to appeal the decision by immigration officials, who rejected its responses to questions about the worker's education and expertise. The company makes specialized coatings for surgical instruments, firearms and automotive parts to prevent wear.

In the lawsuit, the company said the worker, Yassine Aoujil, is a vacuum technology and material expert. Aoujil worked and trained at a French affiliate of Northeast Coating for three years before getting an L-1B visa. He then worked at the Kennebunk location for three more years. The company claims that Aoujil's skills are needed in working with the \$900,000 coating machines it uses.

The L-1B visa allows U.S. companies to hire foreign workers in specialty occupations requiring theoretical or technical expertise. The U.S. government started the program in 1970 to attract more investment in the U.S. by multinational companies and to help them get the workforce they need, according to the libertarian [Cato Institute](#).

The program is used by many U.S. companies to transfer in highly skilled workers from overseas operations. Unlike other programs for foreign workers, including those used in Maine and elsewhere to boost seasonal help, there is no cap on L-1B visas.

The number of L-1B visas issued peaked at nearly 85,000 just before the Great Recession in 2007, according to the Cato Institute. The numbers declined to 77,000 in 2019 and they were down to just over 35,000 in the first half of 2020. The decline is due to the Great Recession and policy changes under the administration of former President Donald Trump, who enacted hard-line immigration policies during his tenure and [restricted visas during the pandemic](#), citing a need to prioritize domestic workers.

Northeast Coating applied for a visa extension in August 2020 for Aoujil to work another two years. U.S. immigration asked the company for evidence to substantiate the extension, but the renewal was denied, with the parties disagreeing about Aoujil's qualifications. Northeast Coating

is not asking for specific financial penalties, but it asks that the court take over the case and reconsider it.

“All we’re seeking in this suit is that the talented engineer at the heart of the case, who has extensive experience and knowledge in NCT’s proprietary products and processes, be issued a visa so that he can return to work and help NCT serve its clients and maintain its competitive edge,” Patrick Taural, a lawyer for Northeast Coating, said.

A spokesperson for the U.S. attorney’s office in Portland, one of whose employees was named in the lawsuit, declined to comment.