

Immigrant workers rounded up in Detroit INS raids

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Immigration and Naturalization Service agents have raided dozens of factories and other businesses in the Detroit area and arrested nearly 2,000 undocumented workers this year. The increase, up from 1,500 arrests in 1997, is part of a national crackdown by the Clinton administration.

Over the last five years INS funding has increased by 153 percent to \$3.8 billion, 153 percent higher than five years ago. Between 1996 and 2001, 1,000 new border agents and 300 support employees are being added each year. INS officials boast that they have already held 275,000 deportation hearings, more than double the number in 1994.

While much of the INS's resources have been used to seal the US-Mexico border, the government agency has also increased its efforts to round up and deport immigrants working in other parts of the country. Three years ago, because of budget restraints, Detroit did not have an administrative judge to rule in deportation hearings, and relied on a Chicago judge who visited the city once a month. Now there are three full-time judges in Detroit.

The INS has targeted Metro Detroit's low-paying auto parts, meatpacking and landscaping industries, where there is a high concentration of immigrant workers, particularly Mexicans.

This began last September with a series of raids that outraged Hispanic groups and immigrant rights advocates. The first raid was at Gonzales Design Engineering in Madison Heights, and Gonzales Manufacturing Technologies in Detroit, where 18 workers were arrested. Other raids were conducted at American Bumper in Ionia in western Michigan with 14 arrests; Mast Nursery in Grand Rapids with 33 arrests; and at the Thorn Apple Valley meat processing plant in Detroit with 36 arrests.

American Bumper and Thorn Apple Valley (TAV) are known for their brutal working conditions, low wages and high rate of turnover. The TAV plant--which has many younger immigrant workers, including Mexicans and Eastern Europeans--has a starting wage of \$5.50 an hour. The INS sweep took place just as workers were voting on a contract proposed by TAV and the notoriously pro-company United Food and Commercial Workers union.

The most recent raid took place November 12, when INS agents arrested 25 workers at Torre and Bruglio, a commercial landscaping business in Pontiac. Following the arrests John Dam, supervisory special agent for the Detroit District Office of the INS, said, the raid 'makes approximately \$1 million in seasonal wages available' for Americans and foreigners with work permits.

It is significant that the INS's largest raids coincided with last summer's strike by GM workers in Flint where the UAW sought to channel workers' anger over the destruction of jobs down the path of anti-Mexican chauvinism. After the UAW ended the strike and accepted further downsizing by GM, a union local in Pontiac launched a series of protests against visiting GM workers from Mexico who were being trained at the Pontiac facility. The UAW Local 594 president issued a leaflet demanding 'all of these foreign Mexican employees be removed from the premises.'

Most recently the United Steelworkers union in Detroit organized a protest, side by side with management, calling on the Clinton administration to 'save American jobs' by stopping the 'dumping' of foreign steel in the US market.

These actions have facilitated the INS's work. In response to the raids the unions have issued no statements, nor taken any action, to protect immigrant workers or protest the storm-trooper tactics of the INS

agents.

At a meeting recently called by the Chicano Development Center to protest the raids, one worker described the methods of the INS. Salina, a young worker, witnessed four raids in the five years she worked at Mexican Industries, an auto parts factory in Detroit.

'When the agents came, people were running everywhere, hiding in the bathrooms and in boxes in the warehouse. Others stayed at their workstations. Management then came out with a list of workers.

'They grabbed workers, threw them to the ground and beat them with sticks. One worker, a US citizen, went over to see his sister who had been put in the back of a van. They grabbed him and began beating him. A number of us came out of the factory and the INS tried to grab us. We said we were US citizens and asked them why they were beating our coworker. They said it was none of our business, and that we were employees of Mexican Industries and we had better get back to work. We asked them for their badge numbers; that's when they finally stopped beating him.

'These raids took place between 1991 and 1996. Management knew these workers were undocumented. They figured if these workers tried to get a union, all they would have to do was call the INS. The UAW never got in. After that the supervisors really treated the workers badly. They said if you don't like it, quit. That's when I decided to quit.'

Changes in federal laws under the Clinton administration have restricted even further the legal rights of immigrants. Mosabi Hamed, an attorney who spoke at the same meeting, described the impact of one such law, the Anti-Terrorism Act. 'If you were a member of an 'Islamic Organization' in the old country, or were involved in any kind of politics, you get demonized, just like being labeled a 'communist' was in the 1930s. It's not just Arabs, it's Central Americans, Europeans, Asians being victimized.

'The Supreme Court has agreed to hear a case of eight immigrants in Los Angeles who are facing deportation because of their political beliefs. A federal court had previously found it unconstitutional to deport someone for that. But now the Court wants to use political views as a basis to throw someone out of the country.'

Detainees already lack the constitutional protections afforded to US citizens, such as the right to a court-

appointed lawyer, a trial before a jury or a judge and the opportunity to confront witnesses. 'If you are an immigrant and you cannot afford an attorney, too bad,' Hamed said. 'You do not get a trial, but a hearing before an immigration officer. In a criminal case you can examine evidence against you, but under the Anti-Terrorism Act, evidence can be introduced 'off the record' and a detainee has no right to see the evidence or even find out who provided it. The government says this is 'classified' information. You can also be held for years without a hearing.'

The attorney reported that in Detroit the INS uses informers to watch and photograph immigrants as they leave mosques and churches and play sports at recreation areas. He explained that he learned one of his clients had been recruited as an informer by the Michigan Jobs First Program, which places welfare recipients in jobs. Hamed said, 'I asked him what he did, and he said, 'I watched this guy for one or two weeks. When someone fills out a form for welfare benefits, we follow him.'

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