

US Border Patrol launches police-state sweeps against California immigrants

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2 July 2004

More than 470 undocumented immigrants have been arrested in San Bernardino and San Diego counties in California since June 4 in a wave of random sweeps carried out by the Border Patrol (BP), part of the Bureau of Customs and Border Protection. People are being detained at random to confirm their immigration status. Those who are considered deportable are then sent to jail while their deportation is processed. No consideration is given to the fate of immigrant families or to their US children; people are simply whisked away.

In the course of three weeks, daily BP sweeps took place at bus stops, near markets and during routine traffic stops mainly in the cities of Ontario, Temecula, and Upland in San Bernardino County; Corona in Riverside County; and Escondido in San Diego County. Many of those arrested have already been deported to Tijuana, Mexico.

The targets of the raids are ordinary immigrants, some of them with many years of residence in the United States. Over the course of three weeks, approximately 10,000 people who had committed no crime were stopped and asked to prove their right to reside in the US. Church officials and immigrant advocates indicate that the main criterion for stopping these individuals was the color of their skin.

Those who could not produce documentation were taken into custody until a relative or friend brought in their documents. Of the 470 arrests made, most were from Mexico. While awaiting deportation, immigrants from Central and South America and Mexico who requested a court hearing are detained, often in privately run prisons in the company of felons, where many are beaten, humiliated and assaulted, according to Human Rights Watch reports.

A special mobile task force consisting of 12 agents from the Temecula Station carried out the sweeps in San Bernardino, Riverside and San Diego counties.

The primary objective of the raids, according to BP agent Tomas Jimenez, “is to prevent the entering of terrorists and terrorist arms to the United States.” Other Border Patrol officials indicated during a meeting with San Bernardino community leaders that the raids were part of an intelligence-gathering operation aimed at terrorists and smugglers.

There is no evidence that this is so. No smugglers or terrorists have been apprehended. A far more likely motive is that this is a test of a new procedure, part of an escalating trend of using unconstitutional methods against undocumented workers. Counting on an increase in manpower and resources, the BP has expanded its operations inland, testing the political reaction among immigrant groups.

The arrests and deportations have created a sense of unease among Asian and Latin American workers throughout California. Immigrants in cities in Los Angeles County, in Santa Barbara and in San Jose also have reported seeing border patrol vans patrolling their neighborhoods.

The Border Patrol denies that the sweeps went beyond the three Southern California counties. Both the BP and the Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) have declared that the reports of sweeps in other cities of the state are unfounded; however, these agencies have no credibility among immigrant workers.

Immigration vans have been spotted in Monterrey and in Salinas, a center of agricultural labor. On May 6, in San Francisco, ICE agents conducted a raid on the Sunset Hotel, allegedly to arrest a South Asian immigrant. While there, they swept through the facility and arrested another South Asian as well as seven Mexican undocumented workers. Since then, two more similar raids have taken place. Last year, immigration raids were also conducted in the Chinatown district.

In Los Angeles, BP agents have stopped and detained

immigrants in South and Central Los Angeles. In San Diego, BP agents have been reported boarding the trolleys and questioning passengers in immigrant neighborhoods, as well as in the central Old Town district.

People are afraid to leave their homes, to shop, to go to clinics or schools. In the Central Valley city of Firebaugh, halfway between Los Angeles and San Francisco, reports of BP agents watching roads in and out of the city have kept hundreds of immigrant workers away from their agricultural jobs. In nearby Dos Palos and Los Baños, there were reports of 27 arrests; and in Los Baños, an entire family was taken into custody at a supermarket parking lot.

The BP insists it has the right to conduct these raids, and has done so in Texas and other parts of California. It denies that it singles out Mexican-looking individuals to stop, and has assured “law-abiding” citizens that they have nothing to fear.

The raids suggest otherwise. A Pomona day worker who witnessed BP agents questioning workers in Ontario reported that they only stopped and questioned Latino workers, bypassing black and white individuals.

Senior Agent Jimenez stated to the *Los Angeles Times* that agents will refrain from checking in churches, homes and schools. But according to a report from the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), there is evidence that English classes for adults have been targeted; also raided were trolley stations and a *quinceañera* cotillion party in Orange County.

The randomness of the sweeps raises profound constitutional questions. The Bill of Rights of the US Constitution prohibits authorities from unreasonable searches and recognizes the right of all people in the United States against self-incrimination.

The practice of detaining people in the streets and busting into their homes and workplaces to check on their identification is common in police states. By requiring people to prove who they are, when they have committed no crime, the BP is in fact establishing a precedent that can be used against anyone, immigrants and citizens alike.

Washington officials at the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) objected to the raids only from the standpoint of procedure. The DHS suggested that the BP may have overstepped its authority, and that ICE should have been involved. It also declared that the profiling of immigrants on the basis of skin color is contrary to their policies. The DHS did not disavow the legality of the sweeps and will take no disciplinary action against the BP in Temecula. Suzanne Lubert, a DHS spokeswoman,

indicated that the Temecula unit’s actions were a coordination problem and not a disciplinary one, since no laws were violated.

Immigration raids on factories and farms targeting undocumented workers were common in California before 1994. After that, the immigration enforcement shifted to the 25 crossings along the California-Mexico border.

Since 2001, attacks on immigrants have steadily escalated. At the US-Mexico border, an increase in BP agents and the use of high-tech equipment have forced undocumented workers to take perilous desert routes. So far this year, 388 immigrants have died trying to cross, according to Mexican government statistics. More than half a million arrests have been made at the border.

An economic collapse and a severe drought in Mexico are pushing increasing numbers of workers across the border. In their desperation to feed their families, and unable to enter legally, immigrants have no choice but to risk their lives to enter the United States.

The sweeps have mobilized immigrants and their supporters in protest across California, including about 5,000 people who marched on June 15 between Ontario and Pomona, California. At the Temecula Border Patrol Station, on June 28, hundreds protested the raids in a tense demonstration in which riot-equipped agents surrounded the demonstrators. Other protests have taken place in Salinas, San Francisco, Los Angeles, San Diego and Santa Ana.

At the Ontario protest, demonstrators included undocumented day laborers from Pomona and other cities, which, at great personal risk, took a stand against the repression. Also marching were community college and university students as well as representatives of community organizations and religious officials.

A June 30 demonstration in San Diego’s Chicano Park included parents whose sons and daughters are fighting in Iraq, including a father who lost his son there. The *San Diego Union-Tribune* quoted a woman whose son is in Fallujah: “He is fighting for a country where rights are being taken away from his family, his friends, and his community,” said Sonia Rodriguez.



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