

In wake of mass immigrant protests

US government arrests record numbers in factory raids

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In a nationwide dragnet Wednesday, US immigration enforcement agents raided factories across the country arresting nearly 1,200 undocumented workers, a record number for a single operation.

The raids come in the wake of massive demonstrations throughout the country protesting reactionary anti-immigrant legislation in Congress and demanding full legal status and citizenship rights for the millions of undocumented workers who have come to find jobs and a better life.

The immigration raids hit plants of the German-based IFCO Systems company, which makes and recycles wooden pallets and containers. Heavily armed agents in bullet-proof vests swooped down on factories in Texas, upstate New York, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, Ohio, Illinois, Indiana, Arizona, Virginia and Massachusetts at approximately 9 a.m., rounding up workers and loading them into buses and vans. Searches and arrests were conducted at a total of 40 facilities spread out over 26 states.

The Homeland Security Department held a press conference after the raids, proclaiming them to be part of a new “interior enforcement strategy” and promising a continuing crackdown. “Employers and workers alike should be on notice that the status quo has changed,” said Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff.

Many of those involved in the recent immigration demonstrations see Wednesday’s raids as an act of retaliation aimed at silencing these protests.

“This is a scare tactic,” Angela Mejia, who helped organize the massive April 10 march in Houston, Texas, told the *Houston Chronicle*. “We haven’t had raids for a very long, long time. It’s a sad thing if we have raids by the government to stop people from expressing their freedom of speech.”

The intimidation apparently had a significant effect. Reports from other cities told of weeping family members outside of factories and of immigrant neighborhoods where people were staying away from work and even stores for fear of being caught in a round-up.

Together with the raids and arrests, hundreds of immigrant workers have been fired or otherwise penalized by employers across the US in the past several weeks, in retaliation for their participation in the mass demonstrations.

The firings occurred at establishments from Florida to Texas to

Michigan, Illinois and Wisconsin. In Texas, workers at a seafood restaurant in Houston were discharged, as were welders at an air-conditioning factory in Tyler. Restaurant workers in Milwaukee, meatpackers in Detroit (See “Mexican workers fired for attending immigrant rights rally in Detroit”) and factory workers in Illinois lost their jobs. In some instances, the workers were offered their jobs back, but only after proving that they had legal status.

Students have also been penalized for leaving their classes. This had tragic consequences in Ontario, California on March 30, when 14-year-old Anthony Soltero shot himself to death. His family said the suicide was triggered by a threat from the vice principal of his school that he would be fined and jailed for participating in a March 28 walkout. Students dedicated an April 15 immigrant rights rally in Los Angeles to Anthony’s memory.

A national day of action has been called for May 1, with organizers calling on immigrants to skip work and school. There is little doubt that the immigration raids and the firings have been carried out and widely publicized in part as a warning against participation in the May 1 action.

Los Angeles Catholic Cardinal Mahony, who protested the anti-immigrant legislation, and New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg, who calls himself a “friend” of immigrants, have both urged immigrants to ignore the May 1 call. Some of the officials and radio personalities who helped organize the earlier protests have already called for “responsible” protest and urged students to stay in school and workers to obtain permission before missing work.

The mass arrests and firings, however, are only part of a series of developments which amount to a counterattack in response to the mass mobilizations in defense of immigrant rights that have taken place in recent weeks.

While Congressional leaders now claim they will remove the provocative stipulation in pending legislation that would turn all undocumented workers into criminal felons, they are still proposing to make their presence in the country a misdemeanor, meaning they could be arrested and jailed for a crime. Meanwhile, on the state and local level, authorities are escalating their own attacks on these exploited sections of the working class.

In Georgia, for instance, Governor Sonny Perdue has just signed a bill that imposes drastic new conditions affecting the employment of immigrants and their access to state benefits.

The Georgia law requires immigrants to prove their legal status

if they are seeking various state benefits. The police are required to check the immigration status of people they arrest. Thousands of immigrants and their supporters demonstrated against the bill or participated in a one-day work stoppage to protest it.

The *New York Times* reported recently on the growing crackdown on immigrants by local officials. In some areas the legal status of all immigrants in the criminal justice system is being checked, and federal immigration agents are being called so that undocumented workers can be deported. These measures have been taken in areas of the country that are supposedly friendlier to immigrants.

In Putnam County, New York, for instance, a suburban area only 50 miles from New York City, the County Sheriff arrested eight immigrants who were playing soccer on a school ball field and held them for immigration authorities. Seven were able to make bail, but the eighth, a 33-year-old father of five, has been in federal prison in Pennsylvania awaiting deportation since last January.

Local officials who already hold strong anti-immigrant views have been emboldened by the bipartisan political rhetoric legitimizing new crackdowns and using the so-called war against terrorism to call for closing US borders. The sheriff in Putnam County, Donald Smith, said, "We have a situation in our country where our borders are not being adequately protected, and that leaves law enforcement people like us in a very difficult situation."

Smith said federal immigration agents were called because the sheriff's deputies suspected the men were "illegal" and "because we are trying to uphold the law for the citizens of this county." The men were arrested for playing soccer and charged with trespass, a class B misdemeanor. Bail for seven was set at \$1,000, but Juan Jimenez, the worker now held in Pennsylvania, was held on \$3,000 bail because he could not provide his home address.

In many areas, unusually high bail is being set for very minor offenses so that immigrants are unable to post bond before federal agents arrive to take them into custody prior to deportation. Daniel Beck, the sheriff of Allen County in Ohio, complained, "When they are in this country illegally, it's really a right and wrong issue. I will arrest them. Unfortunately, by the time a federal agent gets here, they are sometimes already bailed out of jail."

The *Times* quotes a Long Island immigration lawyer. "The heat is definitely getting turned up. Not just on criminals, but against people I would consider charged with relatively minor offenses: Having an invalid driver's license, a fake Social Security card. A person with a job and a family can end up sitting in jail for months, and then being deported."

In some municipalities, local officials have invoked a 1996 federal law to seek special training in immigration enforcement for local police, in what amounts to a federalization and major expansion of police powers for the specific purpose of targeting undocumented workers. One area where this is taking place is Costa Mesa, California, in suburban Los Angeles, where the city council has authorized the training of local officers in the pursuit of immigrants, a job that was always left to federal enforcement.

In Los Angeles itself, the police have an internal rule that says "undocumented alien status is not a matter for police enforcement." Similar rules apply in New York, but, with prodding and approval from the Bush administration, there are

moves to change these policies.

Congress will soon be returning from a two-week recess and a new effort is expected to broker a "compromise" along the lines of the Senate deal that quickly fell apart two weeks ago, soon after it was cobbled together. The proposed Senate bill, heralded in the media and by big business politicians as a "reform" that would place some undocumented immigrants on the road to citizenship, is a piece of reactionary legislation that would militarize the long US border with Mexico and divide immigrants into three separate classes, allowing for the deportation of millions of workers who have been in the country for less than two years.

The dispute over how to deal with the immigration issue finds large sections of the Republican Party in opposition to the position of the White House, demanding more punitive measures, but also cuts across party lines. On one side are the Bush administration and the Democratic Party leadership, along with the Chamber of Commerce and other big business representatives, who badly need sources of cheap labor and are more than happy to use the undocumented status of immigrants to intimidate them and pit them against other sections of the working class. On the other side are the anti-immigrant xenophobes, who specialize in scapegoating the foreign-born, blaming them for low wages, unemployment, crime and numerous other products of the crisis of the profit system itself.

There are no fundamental differences between these forces. The "pro-immigrant" spokesmen are nothing of the kind. As Farrell Quinlan, a vice president of the Arizona Chamber of Commerce, said recently on the subject of closing the border, "Do we want to see a wall or a fence go up on the border? I don't know. If that's what it takes to get a guest worker program right now, then that might be the price to pay."

The millions of immigrant workers who have risked their jobs and their status in the US by coming into the streets to demand their rights are unrepresented in the Congressional deliberations. The same is true of the working class as a whole. The concern of both Democrats and Republicans is how to control the immigrants, how to strangle the potential for independent working class struggle shown by the recent protests, while continuing to fill the needs for cheap labor of US agribusiness and other major employers.



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