

Mexican workers fired for attending immigrant rights rally in Detroit

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Twenty-one immigrant workers at a meatpacking plant in Detroit were fired last month for participating in a national day of protests against anti-immigrant legislation being drafted in Washington. Wolverine Packing Company fired the workers—all born in Mexico—on March 28, the day after 20,000 immigrants and supporters protested in downtown Detroit.

Among the fired workers—16 women and five men—several had worked for the company for many years, although 20 of the 21 workers were employed through a temporary agency, Minuteman Staffing. Most were undocumented workers, who face the most severe repercussions, including criminal sanctions and deportation, under the legislation currently being debated in Congress.

The day after the rally, when the workers reported for their morning shift, a supervisor told them to clean out their lockers and go home. The only full-time employee, Minerva Ramirez, 31, who earned \$10.35 an hour after working for Wolverine for six years, said she told her supervisor that she planned to go to the demonstration. When she reported to work the next day she was prevented from entering the plant.

“It was not fair,” an undocumented worker who was fired told the *Detroit Free Press*. “We went to fight for our rights.”

Wolverine, which employs 350 mainly Mexican workers in a cluster of three plants in Detroit’s Eastern Market district, is typical of many companies in the meatpacking industry, where tens of thousands of Hispanic and Asian immigrants labor for low wages in unsafe, filthy conditions. This exploitation is maintained through management intimidation, reinforced by periodic military-style raids by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) and the arrest and deportation of thousands of undocumented

workers.

Edith Castillo, head of the Detroit-based Latin Americans for Social and Economic Development, told the *World Socialist Web Site* Wolverine workers are subjected to constant harassment on the job. “Even before they were fired these workers, many who had worked for Wolverine for five or six years, had faced intimidation and harassment by supervisors but were fearful about saying anything because they could lose their jobs.”

“The company first claimed these workers were told to use a personal day if they wanted to attend. But the workers don’t have these benefits; they don’t get personal days. The company put up notices saying the workers would be fired if they participated in the protest. But it is a human right to voice your opinion; everybody is protected by the Constitution, whether you’re an immigrant or not.

“After several has asked for the day off, apparently one of their supervisors said he was interested in going to the demonstration too and if more workers participated they would be protected because the company couldn’t do anything because of the sheer number of people involved.

“The fired workers are very emotional. They felt they have been betrayed after being loyal to the company and working under such conditions, without benefits, sick days and holidays, for years. They were fired even though they had not missed a day of work before. The firing was directly related to them going to the protest.”

Wolverine General Manager Jay Bonahoom defended the firings in a statement on April 6, saying a “small number of contract workers” were “replaced” because they had defied management’s warnings and failed to show up the day of the protest. After it became apparent that scores of Hispanic workers at the

company were determined to attend the rally, Bonahoom said, “Wolverine management decided it would be prudent to inform all employees how important it was that they come to work on this particular day.”

A week later—after the workers protested their firings to the state civil rights officials and the victimizations were reported in the national news media—Wolverine management announced they “had reconsidered the issues” and would hire back the workers with full back pay, effective April 13.”

The retreat, however, was for public relations purposes only because the undocumented workers—the majority of those who were victimized—will not get their jobs back, according to management. Feigning ignorance about the legal status of the immigrant workers at his plant, Bonahoom declared, “Due to reports that some of the temporary staffers may have been illegal, we are requiring our staffing company to recheck employment documentation before sending individuals back to work.”

An advocate for the workers denounced the measure as a “hollow victory,” saying that the company knowingly hired undocumented workers so they could maintain them as “day laborers,” without any rights.

The victimization of the workers was abetted by the United Food and Commercial Workers union and Teamsters, which represent Wolverine workers at two nearby facilities, although there is no union at the factory where the firings took place because it was removed in a decertification vote some years earlier.

Neither the UFCW nor the Teamsters issued any statement in defense of the workers, said Elena Herrada, a spokesperson for the victimized workers, who added, “So much for the Change to Win Coalition,” a reference to the new labor federation which includes the two unions that split off from the AFL-CIO last year, claiming, among other things, that it would better defend the rights of immigrant workers.

The silence of the unions was repeated by the Democratic Party in Detroit, which also said nothing about the firing of workers for exercising their freedom of speech.

The series of mass demonstrations that took place in Los Angeles, Chicago, Washington, New York and dozens of other large and small cities, involved millions of immigrants across the US—literally masses of men

and women from “nowhere,” who exist, for the most part, below the radar screen of the news media and the political establishment. Such a powerful assertion of democratic rights has generated fear and anger from much of big business, which depends on an atmosphere of intimidation and resignation in order to maintain the brutal exploitation of immigrant workers.

In addition to Detroit, there have been several other reports of firings of workers who have participated in the recent demonstrations. Organizers of a rally in Indianapolis—where 10,000 people marched April 10—said they have reports of nearly 20 demonstrators who say they were fired after they joined the protest. In Chicago, where 100,000 people protested on March 10, 33 workers were rehired by Universal Form Clamp Company of Bellwood, Illinois, after protests against the victimizations.

With the US Congress still considering plans to criminalize so-called illegal aliens, as well as those who aid them, immigrant rights groups are planning another series of protests on May 1.



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