US immigration agents arrest 1,282 in raids at six meatpacking plants

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US immigration authorities carried out a massive sweep on Tuesday, arresting close to 1,300 workers on alleged immigration violations. Agents of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency staged raids at six Swift & Co. meatpacking plants, rounding up individuals they charge are working illegally, using the Social Security numbers of US citizens and legal immigrants.

The mass raids by ICE, a section of the Department of Homeland Security, represent the largest-ever workplace crackdown aimed at undocumented immigrants. The morning raids and subsequent arrests were carried out in Greeley, Colorado (261 arrests); Hyrum, Utah (145 arrests); Worthington, Minnesota (230 arrests); Marshalltown, Iowa (90 arrests); Grand Island, Nebraska (261 arrests); and Cactus, Texas (295 arrests).

The arrested meatpacking workers are immigrants from Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Peru, Laos, Sudan, Ethiopia and other countries. Of the 1,282 arrests, 1,217 were on immigration charges and 65 on criminal charges, including identity theft.

The sweep—being called "Operation Wagon Train"—was carefully planned and orchestrated for maximum publicity in an effort by Homeland Security authorities to bolster the Bush administration's anti-immigrant chauvinist credentials. It followed a 10-month investigation by the ICE into immigrants suspected of buying or stealing other people's identities to secure work, described by one ICE spokesperson as "a massive identity-theft scheme."

At the facility in Greeley, Colorado, headquarters of Swift, ICE agents surrounded the perimeter of the beef-packing plant before 7 a.m. They entered the plant around 7:30 a.m., as workers were beginning their morning break. Worker Cynthia Chaparro told the *Greeley Tribune* that workers tried to run, but were captured and held down on the floor of the cafeteria by agents.

Workers were shackled together in groups of four or five, dragged outside and loaded into buses and vans. Family members and others began to gather outside the plant as word of the raid spread, calling out to the workers and shouting at immigration agents as the vehicles drove off with their loved ones.

"How am I supposed to explain to the children that their dad's not coming home?" asked 27-year-old Sara Zarate. She told the *Denver Post* that her husband Candido, a Guatemalan immigrant, supports her and their five children on his $12.20-an-hour wage at the Greeley plant. "Who's going to help me and my kids on Christmas? They're expecting their dad on Christmas," she said.

Luis Garcia, 16, whose grandfather was arrested in the raid, wept outside the plant. "Why can't they leave us here in peace?" he asked. Monica Mills, 21, was looking for her husband and spoke to the *Rocky Mountain News*. He has worked at the plant for seven years. "Who's going to support my kids? What am I supposed to do now? How do I tell my children what happened to their father?" she asked.

Six buses were brought to the Marshalltown, Iowa plant, where 90 workers were arrested. A large crowd gathered outside the plant, including a number of teenagers concerned about their friends, young workers who comprise a substantial portion of the Swift workforce.

A sheriff's deputy described to *USA Today* the scene outside the Hyrum, Utah, plant, where 145 workers were rounded up: "They've got three buses, a bunch of transport vans, a lot of cars and 150 or so agents."

The 230 Swift workers arrested in Worthington,

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Minnesota were reportedly bused to South Dakota. Many relatives of the workers seized at the six plants have been unable to determine their whereabouts and status, and some may very well have already been deported.

According to court affidavits, ICE agents conducted their investigation in preparation for the raids during the summer and fall of 2006, obtaining 1,500 copies of Swift workers' employment documents in July. Last month, immigration officials informed Swift that it would conduct the raids on December 4.

Swift & Co. is the country's third-largest processor of beef and pork, with 15,000 workers in nine plants across eight states and annual sales close to $10 billion. The company had estimated that the raids could remove up to 40 percent of its workforce, although Swift CEO Sam Rovit claimed in a statement that the company "has never condoned the employment of unauthorized workers, nor have we ever knowingly hired such individuals."

Swift has participated since 1997 in Basic Pilot, an online verification system promoted by the Bush administration which is supposed to determine the validity of Social Security numbers provided by workers. Many businesses have criticized the accuracy of the program.

Swift had asked a federal judge to prevent agents from conducting the raid, arguing it would cause "substantial and irreparable injury" to its business. But after a closed hearing on Thursday, a judge rejected the company's request, clearing the way for the sweep. Work at the six affected plants has been temporarily suspended.

The United Food and Commercial Workers union (UFCW), which represents the Swift workers, went into federal court Tuesday seeking an immediate injunction against the raids and issued a mild protest, reiterating their support for "comprehensive immigration reform." Mark Lauritsen, director of the UFCW Food Processing, Packing and Manufacturing division, commented, "This kind of action is totally uncalled for. It's designed to punish workers for working hard every day, contributing to the success of their companies and communities."

The operations at Swift follow a series of raids staged at poultry plants in the South over the past year and a half. In July 2005, nearly 120 people were arrested at a plant in Arkadelphia, Arkansas. Three months ago immigration agents raided a poultry plant in Stillmore, Georgia, arresting more than 100 workers.

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