More than 300 seized in Massachusetts immigration raid

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Federal immigration authorities carried out a massive raid on a New Bedford, Massachusetts, plant Tuesday morning, detaining 300 to 350 immigrant workers and charging the company's owner and three managers with knowingly hiring undocumented workers. The company holds a multimillion-dollar contract with the Defense Department producing supplies for the US military and runs a poverty-wage operation employing mostly Central American labor.

The sweep at Michael Bianco Inc. (MBI) began shortly after 8 a.m., as about 300 agents of the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and New Bedford police converged on the three-story building. Police surrounded the plant, and a Coast Guard helicopter hovered overhead to prevent the workers—mainly women with young children—from escaping. Buses lined up outside waiting to haul workers away.

Witnesses inside the plant described a horrifying scene of one the largest immigration raids ever conducted in the area. The workers—most of them Guatemalans and Salvadorans, working as seamstresses—were ordered to remain at their sewing machines as authorities reviewed their immigration status. Mayhem ensued as some attempted to flee, only to be turned back by police and the bitter winter cold outside the factory.

Tina Pacheco, a supervisor with 14 years at MBI, described the situation to the *Boston Globe*. "When we realized what was going on, a lot of people were screaming and crying. They told American citizens to stand in one area and the people without papers to stand in another area. It was terrible, they were crying and didn't know what was going to happen."

Police guarded the exits while other officers grabbed workers attempting to flee and ordered them to lie on the ground. Some agents brandished handguns. Workers were handcuffed behind their backs with plastic ties and were instructed not to use their cell phones.

Viviana Luis Hernandes, 25, a stitcher whose husband also worked at MBI, said she was forced to wait in the factory for nine hours, handcuffed, while authorities reviewed her case. Like many of the workers, she feared for the welfare of her young child if she were taken away. "When this first happened, all I thought about was my baby," she said. Her husband was also arrested, and she was eventually released because there would be no one to care for her one-year-old.

About 320 undocumented workers were detained. The ICE said 45 workers were released following the raid because of pregnancy or other medical issues, or family and childcare concerns. The remaining 275 were eventually driven by bus about an hour and a half away to Fort Devens, a former military base now used by the Army Reserve, for questioning. About 300 government officials were involved in processing those detained.

An additional 15 women were released from Fort Devens. All those determined by authorities to have no documentation—including those released—will be required to appear in immigration court to determine their status. The majority reportedly will be flown outside the state—some as far away as Texas—to appear before an immigration court judge for deportation proceedings.

The workers include immigrants from Mexico, El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, Cape Verde, Portugal and Brazil. Many have lived and worked in New Bedford for years. If deported, they will be returned to lives of poverty and possible political repression in their native countries. During a press conference following the raid, Rev. Marc Fallon of Catholic Social Services described many of the detained workers as "refugees of civil war" who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder.

Many of those detained are frantic because young children have been left on their own as a result of the raid. Immigration advocates estimate that as many as 200 children are missing a parent caught up in the sweep. Many were left at babysitters and daycare centers for hours following the raid, with caregivers receiving no word from their mothers or fathers. Corinn Williams, director of the Community Economic Development Center of Southeastern Massachusetts, commented: "It's been a widespread humanitarian crisis here in New Bedford."

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As details became known following Tuesday's raid, a picture emerged of virtual slave-labor conditions at Michael Bianco Inc., with workers toiling long hours for minimal pay and subjected to brutal reprisals at the hands of management. The vast majority of workers employed by MBI had no documentation. A government investigation revealed that company management steered workers to a source to obtain phony work papers—at $120 apiece—and then preyed on their fear of deportation to exploit them.

MBI, once a small operation manufacturing high-end handbags and other leather goods, won Defense Department contracts between 2001 and 2003 worth $10 million to produce two types of airmen's survival vests. In 2004, the company won another $82 million to make lightweight backpacks for the military. The workforce at the plant skyrocketed from 85 employees in 2001 to more than 500 by 2005, and the owner was granted $57,000 in tax breaks by the city.

Company owner Francesco Insolia, 50, along with payroll manager Ana Figueroa, plant manager Dilia Costa and office manager Gloria Melo, are charged by federal authorities with "conspiring to encourage or induce illegal aliens to reside in the United States, and conspiring to hire illegal aliens."

US Attorney Michael J. Sullivan commented on the charges: "It is alleged that MBI, Insolia and others knowingly and intentionally exploited the government by recruiting and hiring illegal aliens without authorization to work, exploited the workforce with low-paying jobs and horrible working conditions, and exploited the taxpayers by securing lucrative contracts funded by our legal workforce."

The government's allegations are small comfort to the hundreds of immigrants who will most likely be deported back to their home countries. In many cases, they will also be forced to make the wrenching decision to either leave behind their young children—many of them US citizens—or take them to a country where they have never set foot.

A three-year ICE investigation of MBI found that Insolia ran "a sweatshop" where workers earned only $7.00 to 7.50 an hour, received no benefits, and were paid no overtime. In reality, wages were far lower after deductions for violations of draconian company policy.

Workers were docked 15 minutes' pay for every minute they were late for work. They were fined $20 for spending more than two minutes in the restroom, with second violations resulting in dismissal. They were also fined $20 for leaving work before the break bell sounded or for talking during work. The company provided only one roll of toilet paper per stall in the restroom, which ran out in less than an hour.

With the fear of deportation constantly hanging over them, workers were afraid to speak out against the deplorable conditions, as better jobs are virtually nonexistent. With 9.4 percent unemployment, Greater New Bedford has the highest jobless rate in the state of Massachusetts.

Many of the area's small manufacturing plants have shut down. Just this week, Revere Copper Products, founded by American revolutionary Paul Revere in 1801, announced that it will close the plant within the next six months. Presently employing 85, the company had 1,200 workers at its peak.

For centuries, immigrants have formed the backbone of this coastal New England city and the surrounding area, manning whaling fleets, working in seafood processing and working in textile and other small mills. Today, those without documentation live in constant fear of being rounded up. In a number of families, one parent has residence status while the other has navigated the immigration system for years in attempts to gain it, to no avail.

An estimated 3,000 Central Americans—mostly young men from Guatemala—currently work in New Bedford's fish-processing industry. In December 2005, an early-morning sweep by the US Coast Guard and immigration authorities resulted in the arrest of 13 men at the AML International and other fish processing plants on New Bedford's waterfront. Those picked up in the raid included seven men from Guatemala, three from El Salvador, two from Mexico and one from Honduras.

As word of the raid spread by cell phone, plants emptied out across the city. Frank Ferreira, plant manager at AML, told the *Globe*, "People were just leaving because they didn't want to get in trouble. Even the legal ones left. Nobody knew what was going on. It looked like an invasion."

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