

# Washington launches war on immigrants: thousands grabbed in nationwide raids

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In a brutal escalation of its vindictive policy towards immigrant workers, the Bush administration has launched a series of raids on homes and workplaces across the country, rounding up thousands for deportation.

The Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)—an arm of the Department of Homeland Security—announced Wednesday that it had arrested 1,300 undocumented immigrants in southern California alone in a series of raids that ended earlier this week. Of those, 600 have already been deported.

Hundreds of others in immigrant communities on Long Island, New York were dragged out of their homes after agents forced their way in during two days of pre-dawn raids last month.

In Reno, Nevada, ICE conducted workplace roundups at a series of McDonalds restaurants, marching uniformed employees out in handcuffs.

In an interview on ABC television news Thursday night, Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff boasted of the scale of the current crackdown, claiming that it was virtually unprecedented in the US.

“I think we’re talking about something the American people have never seen before, which is what do we do and what do we see when the government gets serious about using all the legal tools available to make the law work and to enforce the law,” Chertoff said.

In fact, what Chertoff is talking about and what is being enacted on the streets of Los Angeles, Long Island, and Reno has been seen all too many times. The abuse and brutalization of immigrants was carried out on a massive scale just six years ago in the round-up of thousands of Arab and Muslim immigrants in the wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. Also, historical precedence can be found in the Palmer Raids in which thousands of immigrants were indiscriminately arrested as part of the Red Scare of 1919-1920.

More recently, ICE agents last December carried out a series of lightning raids at meatpacking plants throughout the Midwest, arresting 1,297 workers on their jobs.

As in those earlier shameful episodes, it is far from clear that the US government is using “legal tools” in this latest crackdown, in which home invasions, unlawful interrogations and incommunicado detentions are all being utilized in

violation of the basic constitutional rights that apply to citizens and non-citizens alike.

According to figures provided by ICE, 2,357 undocumented workers were rounded up last month for failing to obey previous deportation orders. During the same period, at least 200 were detained in work-site raids. So far this year, the agency reports, over 30,000 men, women and children have been arrested for ignoring deportation orders. The number grabbed at their jobs has risen to 3,651.

Chertoff claimed that the figures represented a “tenfold increase in the number of absconders that we’ve rounded up and sent back.” He added, “We’re really pulling out all the stops.”

In all of the raids, members of the targeted communities reported tragic situations in which families were broken up, with undocumented workers dragged away from spouses and children who are either US citizens or have legal residency. In the majority of cases, those being seized are accused of no other crime than that of entering the country without a visa or overstaying an expired visa.

In other cases, they are undocumented workers who committed minor offenses many years earlier, having worked and raised families in the US in the intervening years. Yet they are being hunted down by ICE snatch squads as if they were dealing with armed terrorists.

The *Los Angeles Times* cited the case of Ramon Yac Mahik, a 35-year-old garment worker who was ordered deported over a minor criminal record from more a decade ago. He has three children, ages 16, 10 and 5—all US citizens—and his wife, injured in a recent car accident, is unable to work.

“I don’t consider myself a criminal,” he told the newspaper. “I would like to fight to see if they let me stay here with my children. To leave them abandoned would be horrible for me...And I don’t want them to suffer.”

While the raids in the Los Angeles area were cast by US authorities as a crackdown on criminal immigrants, over one-third of those rounded up had no criminal records and were wanted only for immigration violations. Of those arrested, some 800 were already in custody in county jails. The other 500, however, were detained in raids carried out in the neighborhoods. Out of these, 450 were charged only with

failing to comply with a deportation order and had committed no criminal acts.

The Spanish-language newspaper *La Opinión* cited the case of one of these detainees named Maria. She was brought to the US by her parents as an 11-year-old child, entering on a tourist visa. While the family had attempted to regularize its status over the years, its efforts proved unsuccessful, largely because of the incompetence of an immigration lawyer. In the meantime, she married a US citizen and gave birth to a child. She was released with an order to appear in court only because she is still nursing the baby.

“They grabbed me, they put me in handcuffs in front of my family as if I were a criminal,” the young woman told the paper.

In the Nevada raids, 54 people were arrested at 11 different restaurants in Reno and nearby Fernley. None of them were charged with any crime. The raids sparked a demonstration by over 1,000 people in Reno. Hundreds of students at the local Sparks High School walked out in protest. Some carried signs reading, “Don’t forget the children, they are voiceless” and “We have hopes and dreams.”

Similar and even worse scenes were played out in various Long Island, New York communities, where ICE squads carried out a series of pre-dawn raids on September 24 and 26.

The raids were so violent and indiscriminate that they provoked a formal protest from Nassau County Executive Thomas Suozzi and his Police Commissioner Lawrence Mulvey, who said that county cops would no longer cooperate with ICE until the incident is clarified.

County officials reported that the federal agency had presented the raids as an anti-gang operation aimed at serving warrants against known gang members who are also facing immigration charges.

The ICE agents, accompanied by members of the Border Patrol, conducted the raids as if they were a military assault. They stormed houses armed with shotguns and submachine guns and, in some cases, wearing cowboy hats. Nassau police claimed that on at least two occasions they turned their guns on the local cops who were providing them with backup.

In the end, according to the Nassau County authorities, all but six of the 96 warrants produced by ICE turned out to be invalid, containing multiple errors giving wrong names or addresses. Of the 186 people rounded up in the raids, not a single one was named in any of the warrants.

Nassau County cops reported that, in one case, the ICE agents were searching for 28-year-old man using a photograph taken when he was seven years old.

The county officials concluded that the claim of a gang crackdown was merely a pretext for conducting an indiscriminate fishing expedition. Those detained were labeled gang “collaborators.” In one case this included both parents of a 17-year-old youth who was supposedly in a gang.

Nadia Marin, the director of the Center for Labor Rights, a

Long Island immigrant advocacy group, said that in a number of cases, ICE agents had broken down doors, smashed windows and dragged people out of their homes by their hair in front of terrified children and family members.

“The children have come and said that they saw the agents grabbing their parents, and many of these children are US citizens or legal residents,” she said.

She described other cases in which the agents forced their way into homes where everyone in the family had documents proving their legal status. “They left,” she said. “But they broke down the doors and interrogated everyone inside the house. This is not only affecting the undocumented.”

The raids in New York have prompted a federal lawsuit seeking a restraining order against ICE, barring it from conducting further home invasions without court-issued search warrants.

The suit, brought by the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund and the law firm of Dewey & LeBoeuf, describes one instance in which a homeowner answered a knock on his door only to confront heavily armed ICE agents “who immediately put a gun to his chest and then proceeded to search the victim’s home.”

Others reported that teams of six to ten agents raided their homes in the pre-dawn hours, without showing a warrant or obtaining consent. Families were unlawfully detained in their own homes and interrogated by the agents who did not allow them to even get dressed.

The suit charges that the raids constitute a gross violation of the Fourth Amendment guarantee against unreasonable searches and seizures.

The Bush administration has undoubtedly unleashed this wave of repression against immigrants at least in part as an attempt to curry favor with its right-wing base following the political debacle it suffered with the defeat of its immigration legislation last summer.

But more fundamentally, the unlawful police-state methods used in rounding up undocumented workers—as well as in detaining citizens and legal residents, described by ICE as “collateral damage”—in the US are of a piece with the armed violence and lawlessness that characterizes Washington’s military and intelligence operations around the globe. They also serve as a warning of the kind of measures being prepared against the American working class as a whole.



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