

Aftermath of US slaughterhouse raid: Fear and repression grip Iowa town

Bill Van Auken**26 May 2008**

Two weeks have passed since an army of US immigration agents, backed by local and state police and members of other agencies carried out the largest single workplace raid in US history.

With helicopters flying overhead, the agents stormed the Agriprocessors meat packing plant in Postville, Iowa, detaining all of its employees and demanding that they prove their American citizenship or legal residence in the US. In the end, 389 workers were hauled away, the bulk of them to a makeshift detention camp at the nearby Waterloo, Iowa's Cattle Congress grounds—an arena used for livestock shows. Women detainees were packed into county jails.

While the glare of the national media moved away from Postville shortly after the record raid, the suffering for the hundreds of workers and their families caught up in this massive act of government repression had only begun.

In what followed in this Iowa town of barely 2,300 people—mass detentions, assembly-line trials in makeshift courts, federal agents harassing people in the streets and many hundreds of people hiding in fear of a knock on the door—there was more than a whiff of fascism.

In the immediate aftermath of the raid, immigrant workers, including the families of those rounded up by the Department of Homeland Security's Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents, poured into St. Bridget's Catholic Church, just a few blocks away from the meatpacking plant, seeking refuge.

Some 400 men, women and children—many of them US citizens—spent days sleeping in the pews and on the floor, afraid to return to their homes for fear that ICE snatch squads would also come for them or their family members. Local public school attendance fell to 65 percent, as immigrant families kept their children off the streets, and a number of local businesses shut their doors.

"I am looking at the faces of women whose husbands have been detained," said Sister Mary McCauley of St. Bridget's. "They are left with two or three children and they are just absolutely devastated, they are lost, they are forlorn, they are frightened, they are filled with anxiety. They don't know if they themselves are safe, they don't know if their children are safe."

Another Catholic nun who works with the immigrant families in the area traveled to Washington last Tuesday to testify at a Congressional hearing on immigration policy. Fighting back tears, Sister Kathy Thill told of families being "torn apart" by the raids, with fathers in detention and mothers left to care for their children with no income.

"I am also a United States citizen who grew up believing that this is a democratic country in which the dignity of all people is respected and their rights protected," she said at a news conference following the hearing. "This is not the country I experienced this past week."

She also described incidents in which ICE agents are continuing to

stop people in store parking lots in Postville, questioning them about their immigration status. "Fear is rampant," she said.

She went on to recount how she received a telephone call while driving donated food from Waterloo to the church in Postville, informing her that authorities were setting up checkpoints along the route.

She feared that she herself could be detained for providing aid to the undocumented workers. "I suddenly felt like I was in a strange country," she said. "I didn't feel free."

Meanwhile, a local public school guidance counselor with who was known in the town for providing assistance to immigrant families has also apparently been targeted for repression. The counselor, Ron Wahls, who is also a minister at a local Hispanic church, was summoned last Thursday to appear before a grand jury next month.

In the affidavit ICE submitted to obtain warrants for the raid, the federal agency named an RW, apparently referring to Wahls, claiming that he was a "point of contact" for Agriprocessors workers regarding their Social Security numbers and that he carried an envelope of cash to pay them.

Wahls dismissed the charges as ridiculous, saying that he carried cash because tenants in rental property he owns paid him in cash. As for the other charge, he told the *Des Moines Register*, "I don't even know where my Social Security card is."

ICE officials have touted their "humanitarian" treatment of the immigrant workers, claiming that they took "extraordinary care" to determine whether locking them up would result in young children being left with no one to take care of them, as has happened in previous raids. As a result, nearly 40 women were released to house arrest after being fitted with GPS monitoring devices, attached to their ankles. Several underage workers caught in the roundup were given similar treatment, pending their deportation.

Meanwhile, those who remained in custody were held under conditions of inadequate food and toilet facilities, while being pressured to immediately plead guilty to minor offenses and waive any rights to appeal their deportations.

In all, 306 of the meatpacking workers were charged criminally. All but five of them pleaded guilty to charges of possession of a counterfeit identification document, aggravated identity theft and misuse of a Social Security number, all of them stemming from the papers they filed with Agriprocessors to get work.

As a result, they are to be locked up in federal penitentiaries for five months and then deported to their home countries, where they are supposed to serve three years of probation. The convictions eliminate, for all practical purposes, the ability of these workers to legally reenter the country, where many of them have families.

Federal prosecutors offered this plea deal on a take-it-or-leave-it basis, threatening otherwise to prosecute the workers on more serious charges that could have resulted in two or more years of imprisonment and hundreds of thousands of dollars in fines.

The proceedings themselves were a travesty, with columns of handcuffed workers marched in groups of 20 or more into the makeshift court at Cattle Congress, often represented by a single lawyer.

In some cases, judges asked the mass of detainees to answer key legal questions in their cases with a show of hands before sentencing them to five months in prison and deportation.

“One group of immigrants—all men, clad in orange and blue jail outfits and sandals—sat with bowed heads as federal Magistrate John Scoles explained their rights,” the *Des Moines Register* reported. “One glanced back at the audience, his eyes welled with tears.”

Several pleaded for mercy. “I’m the only source of support my family has,” said Alvaro Anibel Ordonez Lopez, a native of Guatemala.

The US attorney’s office in charge of these summary proceedings boasted to the media that they had recorded “the greatest number of defendants to plead guilty and be sentenced in one day in the Northern District of Iowa.”

The swiftness of the summary justice handed down by the federal authorities against the imprisoned meatpacking workers was apparently driven by a deadline set by the government’s seven-day lease of the Cattle Congress. Their aim was to wrap up the kangaroo courts and move the immigrants out before a Shetland breeders’ show scheduled for the livestock facility this weekend.

The authorities made accommodations for a Saturday night “Cruise Dance,” scheduled before the raid. It went ahead in the Cattle Congress’s Electric Park Ballroom, where over the previous days columns of detainees, their shackles clanking, had been paraded before judges.

The American Civil Liberties Union denounced these mass trials as a gross violation of democratic rights. “The tactics of the prosecutors, the arbitrary plea deadlines, the complexity of the cases, the overwhelming number of cases per lawyer and the language barriers that make representation especially difficult suggest that the government is more interested in getting people deported without hearings than in achieving justice,” said Ben Stone ACLU of Iowa’s executive director.

American Immigration Lawyers Association executive director Jeanne Butterfield also condemned the government for “using its vast power to coerce countless individuals to abandon their rights under the immigration system. She added, “It is inconceivable that among the 300 workers arrested, none has meritorious claims to be in this country under our country’s immigration laws.”

The government of Guatemala formally protested the treatment of its citizens—who accounted for 287 of those arrested at Agriprocessors. In the last two years, the number of Guatemalans forcibly deported by US authorities has more than doubled, from 11,000 in 2005 to over 23,000 in 2007. More than 9,000 Guatemala immigrant workers have been deported so far this year.

There have been no charges whatsoever leveled against Agriprocessors, the largest kosher meatpacking plant in the country. The company’s owners are major contributors to the Republican Party. Before the raid, the United Food and Commercial Workers, which was seeking to unionize the plant, had warned ICE that ongoing federal and state investigations into the company’s payment of sub-

minimum wages to some of its workers, its use of underage labor and violations of safety and sanitation laws would be disrupted if the workers were detained. While formal immigration policy calls for authorities to refrain from raiding companies in which there are ongoing labor disputes, the appeal had no impact.

Lawyers who represented the detained workers said that none of them had been asked anything about offenses committed by management. The company has been cited hundreds of times for sanitation violations, including fecal contamination of meat and chicken and failure to properly screen for BSE, or mad cow disease.

It is now over a century since Upton Sinclair wrote “The Jungle,” his searing indictment of the American meatpacking industry and the capitalist system as a whole. In it he detailed the brutal and often fatal working conditions confronting a previous generation of immigrant workers—Lithuanians in Chicago, who had come to America just like their present-day Guatemalan and Mexican counterparts in Iowa—to escape oppression and seek a better life.

While Sinclair’s book created a public outcry, the government’s response centered entirely on issues of cleanliness in the packing houses, ignoring the plight of the workers.

As the Agriprocessors raid demonstrates, a century later, while the government is largely indifferent to the issues of safety, sanitation and working conditions in the plant, it is prepared to mobilize an army of agents and spend millions of dollars to carry out police state repression against those who work there.

The objective impact of this campaign is not to halt the entry of undocumented workers into the country, but rather to terrorize those who are here and create more favorable conditions for employers like Agriprocessors to subject them to unrestrained exploitation.

In the final analysis, the repression carried out against immigrant workers is directed against the working class as a whole. And, under conditions of mounting social unrest, it is not at all difficult to imagine the semi-fascist methods employed in Postville—mass workplace roundups, makeshift detention camps and drumhead justice—being turned against other sections of workers, regardless of their citizenship or immigration status.



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