

US: Nearly 400 immigrant workers arrested in slaughterhouse raid

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In one of the largest ever government dragnets against immigrant workers, federal agents swooped down upon a meatpacking plant in northeastern Iowa Monday, rounding up nearly 400 workers.

Heavily armed squads of US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents, backed by state and local police, stormed Agriprocessors Inc. in Postville, Iowa, the largest kosher slaughterhouse in the world, while two government helicopters hovered overhead.

In all, 16 local, state and federal agencies were involved in the raids, which had been prepared for months.

Most of those arrested were from either Mexico or Guatemala, while some others were immigrants from Israel and Ukraine. The bulk of them were charged with Social Security fraud for using false numbers—a supposedly criminal offense that results in their forfeiting the contributions deducted from their paychecks—or with the civil offense of lacking proper immigration status.

After being interrogated and handcuffed at the plant, the workers were taken away in Homeland Security buses with covered windows. Over 300 male employees were taken to a makeshift detention camp at the National Cattle Congress fairgrounds in nearby Waterloo, Iowa, where armed guards were posted at the gates. Meanwhile, 76 women were crowded into the Hardin County Jail.

Violeta Aleman, a worker at the plant and a US citizen since 2003, told the Cedar Rapids *Gazette* that the armed agents herded the workers into the cafeteria and ordered them to form two lines, “one for US citizens and one for legal residents,” while the undocumented immigrants were told to remain seated.

To be released, workers had to present proof of their legal status, forcing Aleman to call her husband to come to the slaughterhouse with her passport.

The *Gazette* reported: “On her way out of the plant, she said, she walked past a group of detainees, many of whom she knew. Some asked her to make a phone call for them, others asked her to take their belongings and cell phones home with her. ‘They were looking at me,’ she said, her voice breaking, ‘There was nothing I could do.’”

Because of the large number of detained immigrants involved, judges and court personnel are being brought in to conduct summary legal proceedings in the fairgrounds. The local press reported that the first of these hearings took place Tuesday, with ten workers, shackled at the waist and ankles, herded single file into a ballroom to face a judge.

The raid was the biggest ever conducted in Iowa and may be the largest single-facility arrest ever carried out by US immigration authorities. It was launched in the midst of a nationwide crackdown on immigrant workers that has created a reign of terror in many towns

and cities across the country.

On Tuesday the plant reopened, despite having had fully one third of its work force hauled away in shackles. It was unclear, however, whether the large numbers of ICE agents assembled in Iowa would strike again. The search warrants released by federal officials provided for the arrest of 697 individuals.

Federal authorities announced that 56 of those detained Monday were subsequently granted supervised release, most of them to make arrangements for the care of their children, who in many cases are US citizens. One of the most brutal effects of these raids is to divide families, some of which have resided in the US for many years.

ICE was clearly attempting to avoid the criticism that has been generated by similar workplace raids after children have been left abandoned in local schools or their homes when their parents were jailed.

Rumors flew through immigrant communities in the surrounding area that the immigration enforcers were preparing to raid other plants or even pull people from their homes. ICE issued statements denying that it intends to conduct any “random arrests,” but made no comment on whether further workplace raids were planned.

Nonetheless, hundreds of immigrants turned up at local churches, including St. Bridget’s Catholic Church, just five blocks from the Postville slaughterhouse, seeking aid and advice. Many filled out legal forms granting power of attorney to assure that their children would be cared for in the event that they too are detained.

“The people right now are hearing and seeing the helicopters,” Sister Mary McCauley, a Roman Catholic nun at St. Bridget’s, told the Associated Press. “They are just panic-stricken and very frightened and some of them are coming to the church as a safe haven.” Family members of the arrested slaughterhouse workers had come to the church in tears, she added.

At Queen of Peace Catholic Church in Waterloo, some 500 immigrants gathered on Monday night to seek advice from lawyers on what to do if arrested.

Local stores were empty as immigrants stayed away. There were reports that many families were staying in their homes and keeping their children out of school for fear of being picked up.

Iowa’s Democratic Governor Chet Culver issued a statement supporting the raid. “I believe it is important that we crack down on illegal immigration,” he said. “Illegal means illegal.”

While Culver minimized the role played by the state in the operation, Iowa state troopers were used to secure the plant, while their squad cars were used—one in front and one in back of each Homeland Security bus—to escort the immigrant workers to detention facilities.

Suspicion that the state may have played a larger role in helping prepare the raid was raised by a report from the local school district that it had received a state subpoena issued last month seeking the records of Postville middle and high school students, and in particular the names of children who had worked part-time at two local apartment buildings owned by the Agriprocessors CEO, Sholom Rubashkin.

Postville's Mayor Robert Penrod was less supportive of the ICE action, warning that if Agriprocessors—the largest employer in Iowa's Allamakee County—shut down, the city would turn into “a ghost town.”

“There's people who hate the Hispanics, and there's people who don't like the Jews and would like to run them out of town,” he said, but he added that the majority of the town's residents understood the plant's importance for the local economy.

Hundreds of people turned out Monday night at the gates of the Cattle Congress, where the bulk of the immigrant workers are detained. “We are with you,” and “We are all equal,” they chanted. Some waved signs reading “Honk for human rights.”

Barely half a dozen anti-immigrant protesters squared off with the large crowd, shouting, “Send them back.” The crowd answered, “We have a right to be here too.”

One of those joining the protest was Beth Berger, 23, of Waterloo. She told the Cedar Rapids *Gazette* that her boyfriend, Carlos, had stayed away from work for fear of being arrested. The two are expecting a baby in four months.

“I probably can't do much, but I am here to support them,” she told the newspaper. “They act like they're animals. They're not animals. They're just like everybody else.”

The United Food and Commercial Workers, which had been attempting to unionize workers at the plant, revealed Monday that it had advised US immigration authorities that there was an ongoing labor dispute at the plant and a pending investigation into workplace abuses that would be disrupted by any immigration raid.

The meatpacking plant was reportedly paying some of its employees sub-minimum wages and employing under-age workers off the books.

“With these labor disputes in progress, we urge you to suspend any potentially existing enforcement efforts and refuse to be involved in this labor dispute in accordance with the internal guidance, ‘Questioning Persons During Labor Disputes,’” UFCW Vice President Mark Lauritsen wrote ICE on May 2. US and Iowa Labor Department officials confirmed that there were ongoing investigations into exploitive practices at the slaughterhouse.

Clearly, the union's warning did nothing to dissuade ICE from conducting the raid, and may have even accelerated it. Rubashkin, Agriprocessors' CEO, is a major contributor to the Republican Party. Citing Federal Election Commission records, the *Des Moines Register* reported that Rubashkin has made \$23,750 in federal campaign contributions to Republican candidates and committees since 2000.

While ICE has dramatically increased its workplace raids since the agency was folded into the new Department of Homeland Security in 2003, few employers have been charged with any offense for hiring undocumented workers.

In December 2006, nearly 1,300 workers were rounded up at six Swift & Co. meatpacking plants, for example, but no Swift executive was ever prosecuted.

In fiscal 2007, while 4,900 undocumented workers were arrested, just 92 company owners or corporate officials were charged. The number of workers detained has increased 45-fold since 2001. The

number of employers prosecuted has fallen dramatically, however, from 182 in 1999 to less than half that number last year.

The net impact of the immigration crackdown is to terrorize a substantial section of the US workforce, creating more favorable conditions for their unfettered exploitation and thereby furthering the profit interests of the US ruling elite.

The detentions in Iowa follow a wave of raids across the country. On May 2, ICE agents descended on 11 “El Balazo” restaurants in California's Bay Area, arresting 63 undocumented workers. The raids came just a day after thousands of immigrant advocates had marched in the city demanding an end to such punitive measures.

The previous week, ICE agents had turned up at elementary schools in Oakland, California, a provocative action that sparked heated protests.

In other raids over the past month, ICE detained:

- * Over 100 workers at Pilgrim's Pride poultry plants in Texas, Arkansas, Florida, Tennessee and West Virginia.
- * 24 construction workers employed at a project in the Little Rock, Arkansas airport.
- * 28 landscaping workers in El Paso, Texas.
- * 55 Mexican restaurant workers and the restaurants' owners in New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio and West Virginia.

Meanwhile, 114 employees of a Los Angeles high-tech company filed a lawsuit against ICE on April 25 charging that they were illegally detained and harassed by immigration agents during a raid last February.

ICE raided the plant of Micro Solutions Enterprises, which produces remanufactured imaging supplies, arresting 138 employees, virtually all of whom were subsequently released and are presently fighting deportation orders.

Those suing ICE and the Department of Homeland Security are US citizens and legal residents, who charge that their constitutional rights were violated by being subjected to a “group detention” during the factory raid.

“During the raid, Micro Solutions was sealed off and effectively locked down by armed ICE agents,” said Peter Schey, the attorney representing the workers. “These armed government agents issued orders directing everyone in the building where to go, where to stand, and where to line up. Those detained were not permitted to use their cell phones. This mass detention of US citizens and lawful residents took place without a warrant or probable cause to believe every worker had violated the law and was therefore subject to temporary detention.”

In carrying out its punitive policy against undocumented immigrants, the US government is introducing into the American workplace the type of measures that are generally associated with a police-military dictatorship.



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