

After immigration raid, workers protest conditions in Iowa meatpacking plant

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Immigrant workers marched through the center of Postville, Iowa on Sunday, demonstrating against working conditions at the local meatpacking plant raided by immigration officers ten weeks ago. In the wake of the raid, the plant's workers have reported numerous cases of labor law violations, including the employment of underage workers, physical abuse, and intimidation by management.

On May 12, scores of government agents descended on the plant—helicopters circling overhead—to sweep up 389 workers in the largest single-site immigration raid in US history. Those who could not prove the legality of their working in the United States—some 297 in total—were hauled into prisons to be deported.

Sunday's 1,000-strong demonstration—equivalent to nearly half the town's population—centered around the town's largely Mexican and Guatemalan immigrant population, but included people from all around the Midwest. The demonstration was led by Jewish rabbis and local Catholic clergy.

There were no reports of trade union organizers being present at the demonstration, and the United Food and Commercial Workers, which had earlier tried and failed to organize at the plant, has posted no coverage of the event. Nor were there any reports of political leaders participating.

In the ten weeks since the raid, several of the detained workers have documented numerous labor law violations at the plant, run by Agriprocessors, a major US processor of meat products. The Postville factory is the largest kosher meatpacking plant in the country.

Meatpacking plants are notorious for their long hours and unsafe working conditions. Workers are paid minimal wages to hack away at carcasses at breakneck speed. To avoid wounds from their coworkers, meatpackers often wear up to a dozen pounds of chain

mail, but even that does not prevent regular and grievous accidents. Workers at the Postville plant reported numerous incidents of peers losing fingers and hands.

But even among meatpacking plants, Agriprocessors' Postville plant is exceptionally ruthless, exploiting the precarious position of the largely undocumented workforce to prevent complaints from being aired. "They told us they were going to call immigration if we complained," one worker told the *New York Times*. He said that he once received seven stitches after a supervisor kicked him and he lost control of his knife. The next day, when his stitches broke, he was given a bandage and told to return to work.

Since the plants are so dangerous, Iowa law requires meatpacking workers to be over 18 years old. The worker interviewed by the *Times*, who was underage when he worked at the plant, said he earned \$7.25 per hour and did not always receive his overtime pay. "My work was very hard, because they didn't give me my breaks, and I wasn't getting very much sleep," he told the paper. He was one of 27 underage workers at the plant, according by to Sonia Parras Konrad, an immigration lawyer representing a number of the deportees. "Some of these boys don't even shave," she said.

The Postville plant was founded in 1987 by Aaron Rubashkin, who is credited with bringing large-scale industrial production methods to the processing of kosher meat. Like most rural farming towns in the central US, Postville in the late 1980s was in economic crisis due to industrialization of agriculture, industrial outsourcing, years of regressive social policies, and other factors. The town's particularly distressed state was seen by Rubashkin as a great business opportunity.

Locals and immigrants were drawn into the factory

for extremely low wages, and the company operated with virtual immunity to labor and environmental regulations; in 2006, Agriprocessors admitted it had been dumping untreated waste, including sewage and production effluence, into the water supply. Today, it remains the sole factory in town, and is among the lowest paying of any slaughterhouses in the country, with stated wages as low as the federal minimum, \$6.25 an hour. Despite the high risk of injury on the line, workers are offered family health insurance only if they contribute \$50 of their wages per week into a coverage fund.

The raid exposes a society where undocumented workers treated are no better than slaves, by the Government no less than by the companies that employed them. The immigrants, most of them Guatemalan and Mexican, sought to escape the stifling poverty of their homelands by finding work in the United States, many sending back money to help their families. Guatemala has a per capita GDP of one tenth of the United States and one quarter that of Mexico. Faced with deadly sweatshop conditions and withheld wages, foreign-born workers dared not complain for fear of being handed over by their employers to immigration agents.

Getzel Rubashkin, the grandson of the plant's founder, piously defended the business, saying that the workers duped the utterly innocent company into hiring them. "The high number of illegal people who were working here is more a testimony to the quality of their deceit," said Rubashkin, adding, "they had papers that looked good." In a twist that could have come from the pen of Russian satirist Nikolai Gogol, local newspapers later revealed that the plant overseers had forged the documents themselves, and that immigration agents found stacks of blank falsified resident alien cards in the plant's human resources offices.

When immigration agents raided the plant, hundreds of workers were detained in facilities designed to house cattle, denied proper food and sanitary conditions. Nearly 300 of the detained workers have now been consigned to spend five-month terms in US penitentiaries—charged with document fraud—after which they will be deported.

Meanwhile, the company's owners, who oversaw the vilest abuses of their workforce—not to mention the mass production of the forged documents—have gone

scot-free, with only some mid-level supervisors indicted for "encouraging aliens to reside illegally in the United States." In fact, the most significant dilemma confronting Agriprocessors management in the wake of the ICE raid—how to quickly replace half of its workforce—was solved by recruiting new laborers from out of the desperate populations of Texas homeless shelters.

The immigration authorities were wholly unconcerned with conditions facing the workers; indeed, the raid reportedly disrupted several ongoing investigations into labor violations at the plant.

With a large section of the town's immigrant population caught in the immigration dragnet, the plant's management has sought out even more exploited sections of the working class, recruiting dozens of Somalian immigrants who have fled their country to avoid the civil war raging there. The Des Moines Register interviewed Hassah Yusuf, one of the workers, who said he was told he'd receive a bonus and a month's rent for travelling to the plant. "We never got it," he said. "They're just trying to grab us here." His first paycheck, which took off for rent and a fictitious loan, netted \$8.61.



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