

350 immigrant workers arrested in raid on Mississippi factory

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On Monday, in the latest in a series of large-scale, brutal operations, US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents arrested some 350 immigrant workers employed by Howard Industries in Laurel, Mississippi. The company, which employs more than 3,000 people in Jones County, was forced to close its manufacturing facility for the day.

A raid was also conducted at the Howard Technology Park in nearby Ellisville, in southeast Mississippi. Howard, one of the world's largest manufacturers of electrical transformers, produces dozens of commercial and industrial products.

Hundreds of heavily armed ICE agents, who arrived in unmarked cars and white vans, swarmed into the Laurel facility Monday morning, sealing it off and rounding up 'suspect' employees. ICE agents questioned the workers in mobile trailers.

Hispanic workers were segregated from the other plant employees; US citizens were provided blue armbands to separate them from the immigrants. The media reported that motorists traveling on roads in back of the plant were stopped by officers, wearing flak vests and driving unmarked vehicles, and told to leave the area.

Those detained, who include heads of households, are being held at an undisclosed location. On Tuesday, two of the arrested immigrants, Paula Gomez and Angel Rodriguez Flores, were charged in federal court in Hattiesburg with one count of aggravated identity theft. The penalty for using another person's name and Social Security number is up to two years in prison and/or up to a \$250,000 fine. As many as eight more of the detainees were expected to make initial appearances in court Tuesday afternoon.

The raids produced panic in the Hispanic community in Laurel, a town of 18,000 people. Rumors that federal agents would be making house-to-house searches prompted some families to seek refuge at Iglesia Cristiana

Penial, a church with a largely Spanish-speaking congregation, according to the Associated Press. Pastor Roberto Valez told AP, "We gave them refuge because they were afraid to go back to their homes."

Rodolfo Garcia explained to the wire service that his 22-year-old brother had been detained at the plant. "Everybody's crying, worried about what's going to happen to him," he said in Spanish.

Valez commented that some of the women who agreed to leave the country were fitted with monitoring devices and allowed to go so they could take care of their children.

Catholic Social Services and other community organizations have accounted for more than 150 of the workers' children, but dozens are reportedly still missing.

Shuya Ohno, a spokesman for the Mississippi Immigrants Rights Alliance (MIRA), told the *New York Times*, "It's horrific what ICE is doing to these families and these communities. It's just hard to imagine that this is the United States of America."

Bill Chandler, executive director of MIRA, commented that the raid was "a real affront to our values. They're creating their own terrorism by going after workers."

Chandler told a Jackson, Mississippi television station, "We have a very serious situation with families being split and real terror being inflicted on the families and children in Laurel." MIRA representatives pointed out that the raid had created a major humanitarian crisis. "There's children that won't have anyone there when they get home from school because their parents have been arrested," commented Chandler.

The executive director of the US Human Rights Network, Amaju Baraka, said in a statement, "The raids in Mississippi have a significance that go well beyond the borders of that state. These raids violate international human rights standards and are designed to evoke fear in migrant communities across the country. [Right-wing

commentator] Lou Dobbs and the [anti-immigrant] Minutemen should not be setting US immigration policy.”

The Mississippi state legislature recently passed a vicious anti-immigrant measure, which mandates that employers conduct verification checks of all employees and, according to the US Human Rights Network, “subjects undocumented employees as well as employers who do not comply to harsh sanctions. The arrested workers now face not only deportation but the real possibility of criminal prosecution.”

The new law turns working in Mississippi while undocumented into a felony and calls for “imprisonment in the custody of the Department of Corrections for not less than one (1) year nor more than five (5) years, a fine of not less than one thousand dollars (\$1,000) nor more than ten thousand dollars (\$10,000) or both. Anyone charged with the crime of working without papers will not be eligible for bail.” Mississippi Gov. Haley Barbour, former chairman of the Republican National Committee, signed the bill, which goes into effect January 1.

The descent on Howard Industries is the third major ICE raid in Mississippi in the past year-and-a-half. Seventy-seven people were arrested in Jackson in March 2007 at Tarrasco Steel and 26 immigrants were detained in Pascagoula at Northrup Grumman Shipyard in June 2007.

In May of this year, ICE agents carried out one of its largest operations, raiding a meatpacking plant in Postville, Iowa and detaining nearly 400 immigrant workers. Many of those detained were imprisoned for months on charges of using false documents. Mass hearings were held on the grounds of the National Cattle Congress in Waterloo, Iowa. An interpreter present said later that many of the immigrants did not understand the charges against them.

ICE has increased the pace of workplace raids; arrests of workers that resulted in deportation jumped from 445 in 2003 to 4,077 last year.

Recent arrests of immigrant workers include:

- * 42 workers at Dulles International Airport in Virginia
- * 58 at a chain of Mexican restaurants in Ohio
- * 18 at a Colorado concrete plant
- * 43 at an agricultural business in Hawaii.

In a statement issued to the press, Howard Industries

claimed the company “runs every check allowed to ascertain the immigration status of all applicants for its jobs.

“It is company policy that it hires only US citizens and legal immigrants.”

The firm was founded in 1968. Howard is the largest employer in the region and one of the largest in Mississippi, among the poorest states in the US.

The median household income in Laurel in 2000 was \$25,988, with some 29 percent of the population and 21.4 percent of families living below the official poverty line; 37.5 percent of those under the age of 18 were beneath the poverty line.

Howard, with four main divisions, is a privately-held company, worth nearly \$1 billion. It has a reputation for paying low wages and treating employees badly.

AP notes that in 2002, then-Gov. Ronnie Musgrove convened a special session of the legislature in which lawmakers approved a \$31.5 million taxpayer-backed incentive plan aimed at helping Howard expand its operations. The state required the company to create 2,000 new jobs, 700 by 2007 and another 1,300 by 2012.

William Howard, Jr. is a major figure in the Mississippi Republican party and has been a contributor to the George W. Bush and John McCain campaigns.

In June 2008, the Occupational Safety & Health Administration (OSHA) proposed \$193,000 in fines against Howard Industries for 54 violations of federal safety rules at the two facilities in Laurel. Thirty-six serious violations were cited at its Pendorf Road plant and 15 additional serious violations at its Eastview plant.

Clyde Payne, director of OSHA’s Jackson Area Office commented, “It is unconscionable for an employer to tolerate serious injuries, including amputations, as just a cost of doing business, rather than get out into the production areas and fix these numerous problems before employees get injured.”



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