

# New York City cops arrest immigrant day laborers

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Uniformed New York City police rounded up a group of undocumented immigrants last Tuesday as they waited for work as day laborers on a corner in the Jackson Heights section of Queens.

On October 21, six policemen in two vans showed up at the corner of 69<sup>th</sup> Street and 37<sup>th</sup> Avenue and arrested over a dozen men after demanding that they produce identification.



Immigrant workers wait on a corner in Jackson Heights, New York in hope of getting a day's work.

The crackdown was carried out in what is one of the city's largest gathering spots for immigrant workers seeking casual labor jobs. For years, from morning to late afternoon, scores of workers have lined a 10-block stretch under the elevated Number 7 train and near the exit to the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway.

Construction contractors sometimes cruise the blocks in pickup trucks and vans looking for hired help. Some of them cheat the workers out of their pay after they have done jobs, abandon them at worksites and threaten to call the police or immigration authorities if they complain.

The arrests sent a chilling warning to workers throughout this heavily immigrant neighborhood, which has attracted working people from throughout Latin America as well as East and South Asia.

The roundup signals a break with the policy pursued by successive administrations, including that of billionaire Mayor Michael Bloomberg and his predecessor Republican Rudy Giuliani, which have in the past instructed police department personnel not to concern themselves with the immigration status of those with whom they come into contact. The policy was aimed at not driving undocumented immigrants underground, causing them to shun the police and forgo essential public services.

Local governments across the country have been split in recent years over whether to coordinate the operations of their police departments with the immigrant-hunting operations of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). In some areas, local police have essentially deputized the cops as ICE agents—most notoriously in Arizona's Maricopa County, where local Sheriff Joe Arpaio has used his deputies and mobilized a shotgun-totting posse to hunt down undocumented immigrants, even those working as cleaners in a local city hall.

In most major cities like New York, however, local governments have shied away from such tactics.

In last week's raid, the police told the workers that they were acting on a complaint from someone living near the corner where they were waiting for work.

Yet the raid came just one day after the *New York Times* published an article on the plight of immigrant laborers, who are facing increasing difficulty obtaining work under conditions of the collapse of the housing boom and economic contraction in New York City driven by the financial meltdown on Wall Street.

The article included an interview with a worker, identified by the *Times* as "an illegal immigrant from Mexico." The paper gave the location of the interview, which was precisely the same corner where, a day later, the police vans arrived to round up the undocumented workers.

The turn towards repressive tactics against immigrants can only be understood in the context of growing unemployment and a recession that is having a widening impact on New York City, the center of the world financial crisis. Under conditions in which the day laborers provided a significant source of profit for contractors, they were tolerated. Now that they are in less demand, the police are unleashed against them.

These are among the most oppressed layers of the working class: men and women who left their families and, in many cases, risked their lives crossing the border in order to migrate to New York in search of any kind of work—often the dirtiest and most dangerous—living in isolation and enduring brutal exploitation by contractors and landlords. The use of the police against them is a warning of what will confront far broader sections of working people under conditions of deepening economic crisis.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to several immigrant workers who, with dozens of others, were standing on the corners of Broadway and Roosevelt Avenue—near the scene of last Tuesday's arrests—hoping to be picked up by a contractor.

Pedro, a young worker from Central America, described how the arrests took place:

"We gather here every day before dawn and hope to find work for the day. Most of us come from Mexico and Central America, but there also workers from Ecuador and Colombia."

"I was the first one to be arrested. The police arrived in two vans about 11:30 a.m. last Tuesday. There were three policemen in uniform in each van, including a woman."

"There were 12 of us, and the police ask for IDs. Some of us, like myself, had IDs, but they arrested us anyway. We were handcuffed and taken to the stationhouse in Queens. The police took our pictures and fingerprints, and then we were put in jail cells."

"Later on we were taken in handcuffs to the Queens courthouse and were put in jail cells again before being taken before the judge. The charge was 'obstruction of traffic.'

"We were let go after 7 p.m. on the condition that we stay out of trouble for six months."

"I want to say that we are here to work and support our families because our countries are very poor. Work has slowed down. I do construction or house cleaning work."

Roger, a young worker from Mexico, added, "We are being affected by the economic crisis. We used to work three to four days a week, and now with luck we work only one."

"I do all kinds of work—construction, throwing out garbage and home moving. I also want to say that we work honestly. If we were thieves, we wouldn't be here waiting on the corner."

"Things are very bad, sometimes there is not enough to eat. Ladies from a church show up once a day and give us food. In order to survive, two or three of us get together and live in a single room. The landlord charges \$500 to \$600 for each person, and many times they don't even let us use the kitchen. We have to pay a deposit and one month's rent in order to get the room."

"I think the economy has been going bad for the last three years. Work is not the same. It is good to work with the same employer because when it is a new one, there is the risk of not getting paid at the end of the day. They threaten us and say they will call the police. We know these people, and when they show up they choose someone new."

"Work is very hard. For a full day's work—between 8 and 10 hours—we receive \$60 to \$80."

Further up the same street from where the workers shape up, the blocks are crowded with Mexican and Colombian restaurants as well as travel agents and wire services that specialize in transferring remittances back to the immigrants' home countries.

These remittances account for one of the largest sources of revenue for much of Latin America and the Caribbean, with

over \$60 billion being sent by immigrants in the US to their home countries in 2007.

Now, with immigrants facing the full force of the economic crisis in the US, this flow of money has begun to diminish, spelling hardship for these workers' families back home and spreading the effects of Wall Street's meltdown throughout the hemisphere.

A report prepared by the Central American Bank for Economic Integration last month spelled out the grim implications of the reduction in remittances:

"Increased under-employment, increased poverty, increased income inequality, increased child labor, greater pressure to migrate (even when it is more difficult to get into the United States or keep a job there), harm to human development..."

The bank noted that for the region as a whole, the growth rate for remittances had gone from double to single digits—19 percent to 6 percent over the past year—while warning that it would be "very worrying if it were to become negative."

For some of the region's largest economies—Mexico, which receives the largest share of remittances from the US, and Brazil—this absolute decline in the amount of money sent home by emigrants has already taken place. The Central Bank of Mexico reported that the country received \$1.9 billion in remittances for the month of August, which translates into a 12.2 percent decline on an annual basis.

For the workers standing on the street corner in Jackson Heights, the implications of these economic statistics are very direct and very painful. "Sometimes two weeks go by now without my getting work," said Roger. "I have four children in Mexico, and I don't make enough money to help them."



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