

Obama administration escalates assault on undocumented workers

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In its annual report to the Securities and Exchange Commission dated February 17, 2011, Chipotle Mexican Grill revealed that it fired approximately 450 workers at 50 of its restaurants in Minnesota last year as the result of an audit by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

As part of the Obama administration's expanded investigations into businesses suspected of employing undocumented workers, ICE is investigating approximately 60 more Chipotle restaurants in the Washington DC and Virginia areas and more than 1,000 other businesses suspected of hiring undocumented employees.

The Department of Homeland Security conducts these investigations by auditing companies' Employment Eligibility Verification (I-9) forms, required of all new hires since 1986. ICE increased the number of I-9 audits from 500 in fiscal year 2008, the last year of the Bush administration, to 2,200 audits in 2010. Chipotle's annual report indicates that following the audit ICE sent the company a "Notice of Suspect Documents." The company asked each suspect employee to provide valid work documents and fired those who could not.

The Obama administration claims that the I-9 audits focus on punishing employers who exploit undocumented workers. The fines imposed on noncompliant employers, however, can be reduced through cooperation with ICE and are simply one cost of doing business. While administration officials boasted that average fines exceeded \$110,000 in 2010, Chipotle had a 2010 fourth-quarter net income of \$46.4 million.

The impact on each fired worker and his or her family is devastating. If not detained and subjected to removal by ICE, dismissed workers must find jobs in the super-

exploitative clandestine economy or remain unemployed. The fate of the 450 Chipotle workers fired in Minnesota is largely unknown due to the fact that they are forced to live an underground existence for fear of being detained and removed from the country.

Detention tears apart families, and detainees are subject to deplorable conditions. The latest Human Rights Watch report notes that detainees have been subjected to sexual assaults and harassment, prolonged detention, and arbitrary transfers to detention facilities far from their families and attorneys.

Homeland Security has not publicized the total number of firings the audits have caused in the last couple of years, but they have included over 1,200 workers at ABM janitorial in Minneapolis, 1,800 workers at American Apparel, 253 workers at Overhill Farms in Los Angeles, more than 100 janitors at Seattle Building Maintenance, and about 100 workers at two cattle hide processing companies in South Saint Paul, Minnesota.

The audits are part of stepped up anti-immigrant policies pursued by the Obama administration. A sampling of some of these policies includes:

- Expansion of the Secure Communities Initiative, a multibillion-dollar program to check the immigration status of all people booked in local jails, even for the most minor offenses.
- Deployment of 1,200 National Guard troops to the southwestern border with Mexico last year armed with M-16s and battle gear.
- Earmarking \$600 million for surveillance and police infrastructure along the US-Mexico border.
- Stepped-up use of unmanned Predator drones along the US-Mexico border—the same aircraft used to slaughter "enemy combatants" and thousands of civilians in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

- Continuation of a “zero tolerance” policy for charging and jailing undocumented immigrants crossing the US-Mexico border.

- Expansion of ICE detention facilities that house immigrant detainees.

- Resumption of removing Haitians this January despite the fact that their deportation may be the equivalent of a death sentence given the deplorable conditions in Haiti.

The Obama administration has overseen the removal of some 776,000 people from the US during the past two years. While it has claimed that a priority is the removal of “serious criminals,” it has only been able to apply the label “criminal” to 323,000 or 41.6 percent of deportees, the vast majority of whom committed low-level, nonviolent offenses.

Republican lawmakers seek to go even further, including returns to the notorious workplace raids that occurred during the Bush administration. Elton Gallegly, the new chair of the House Judiciary Committee’s Subcommittee on Immigration Policy and Enforcement, has criticized the Obama administration for not being “tough enough” on illegal immigrants in the workforce. Such raids have in fact been taking place under Obama, but on a smaller scale and recharacterized as “enforcement actions.”

Elsewhere, Arizona lawmakers, who last year passed the notorious Senate Bill 1070 requiring law enforcement to investigate the immigration status of people they stopped, have just introduced an even more draconian bill this year. The new bill would require schools to ask for proof of citizenship for students, and hospitals to ask for the same for non-emergency care. It would prohibit undocumented immigrants from obtaining state licenses, including marriage licenses, require landlords to evict entire families from public housing if any undocumented person lives there, and jail undocumented drivers, who would forfeit their vehicles. In a particularly insidious move, the bill would bestow special birth certificates to children of undocumented parents—another step toward creating a form of legally sanctioned second-class citizenship for an important section of the working class.

Democrats and the Obama administration have used the right-wing attacks as a basis to call for immigration “reform.” The administration supports legislation proposed last year by Democratic Senator Charles

Schumer of New York and Republican Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina that would require immigrants and US citizens to carry biometric Social Security cards to prevent “illegals” from getting jobs, create a guest worker program whose beneficiaries would have virtually no rights, and focus efforts on “securing the border.”

The policies of Democrats and Republicans alike serve the purpose of dividing the working class and expanding police-state powers. Workers should reject all attempts to scapegoat “illegals” for the financial and social crisis that is the product of the capitalist system and the financial aristocracy, not caused by the poorest and most desperate members of society. Workers should have the right to live and work where they choose regardless of national boundaries and without fear of repression.



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