

ICE detains immigration activists in New York, Mississippi

Our reporters
3 March 2017

US immigration officials have begun targeting immigration rights activists across the country to punish them for the “crime” of speaking out in defense of democratic rights.

Daniela Vargas was detained Wednesday by Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents after leaving City Hall in Jackson, Mississippi, where she addressed a press conference of immigration rights advocates, bravely speaking out despite her undocumented status.

The Argentine-born young woman, who was brought here as a seven-year-old, had been exempted from deportation under the DACA program established under the Obama administration, and still nominally in place under Trump. She was in the process of renewing her “dreamer” status, which had lapsed because she had difficulty raising the \$495 application fee, giving a legal loophole for ICE to target her as an outspoken public critic.

Vargas was speaking in defense of her father and brother, who were seized by ICE two weeks ago. “Today my father and brother await deportation,” she told the press, “while I continue to fight this battle as a dreamer to help contribute to this country which I feel that is very much my country.”

According to witnesses, ICE agents pulled up in a car as Vargas was leaving the building, telling her, “you know who we are and you know why we’re here,” handcuffed her and took her away. She is believed to have been removed to a detention center in Louisiana.

Five days earlier, on Friday, February 24, ICE agents detained José Coyote Pérez, a dairy worker in Livingston County, New York. As of this writing, Coyote Pérez is being held at the Buffalo Federal Detention Facility in Batavia, New York.

Coyote Pérez is a member of Workers’ Center of Central New York, a workers’ and immigrants’ rights

group headquartered in Syracuse, New York. WCCNY notes of his case: “He is the father of four children and community leader in Upstate and Central NY, member of the Workers’ Center of CNY and other community organizations. His case was administratively closed in September, but he was detained on February 24, 2017.”

WCCNY has previously said that he has three children who are US citizens and that he was recently issued a work permit.

Coyote Pérez was recently the victim of an incident of workplace violence in Livingston County and survived a “very serious medical condition” some years ago, according to WCCNY.

WCCNY is affiliated with Interfaith Worker Justice, based in Chicago, and campaigns against wage theft and unsafe workplaces. It also is campaigning to have the state of New York grant drivers’ licenses to undocumented immigrants, known as Green Light NY: Driving Together. Twelve states currently allow undocumented drivers to get drivers’ licenses, including California and Vermont.

It is unclear if Coyote Pérez’ detention is related to his work with WCCNY; he was a leader in the Green Light campaign.

After ICE detained Coyote Pérez, students at the State University of New York College at Geneseo, located in Livingston County’s county seat, began calling ICE’s Buffalo Field Office and leaving messages demanding Coyote Pérez’ release.

A SUNY Geneseo professor who asked to remain anonymous told the WWSWS that he saw uniformed Border Patrol agents in Geneseo, about 60 miles from the Canadian border, the day of the arrest.

This is not the first time in recent months that ICE’s Buffalo Field Office has made the news for severe anti-immigrant actions. In October of last year they conducted what ThinkProgress called “the largest workplace raid

under the Obama administration.” ICE officers with Homeland Security Investigations burst into four Buffalo-area Mexican restaurants and arrested 25 allegedly undocumented workers.

The investigation began by targeting the restaurants’ owner, Sergio Ramses Mucino, for allegedly employing undocumented workers and paying them at a rate below the federal minimum wage. While ICE claims that their action helped protect immigrant workers from exploitation, their raid—which NPR described as entailing ICE agents “storm[ing] restaurant kitchens with handguns drawn and police dogs”—has terrorized immigrants in the Buffalo area.

Mucino, who is a lawful permanent resident from Mexico, is out on bail and reopening his restaurants with new workers, but 14 workers still face civil and criminal charges, seven of whom face a felony charge for criminally reentering the US after a previous deportation. Twelve additional workers were not determined to be enforcement priorities but are monitored by ICE, some with GPS ankle-monitoring devices.

In a January 8 report for NPR, John Burnett and Marisa Peñaloza note the fraudulent character of ICE claiming that these workplace raids are to prevent further exploitation of undocumented workers: “While Mucino is out on bail and reopening his restaurants one by one, most of his illegal workforce is out of a job and facing deportation. This was the aftermath of the raid despite an ICE statement that they were targeting the abusive employer, not his employees.”

The Obama administration shifted away from the mass workplace raids under the Bush administration toward auditing for “crimes” such as using false Social Security Numbers to work. The Obama administration deported over 2.7 million immigrants, more than all previous presidents combined, earning President Barack Obama the moniker “deporter-in-chief.”

The dramatic increase of xenophobic measures under the Trump administration, including mass ICE raids, speaks to a qualitative escalation in the attacks against immigrants and the working class as a whole.



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