

Immigrant workers in US brace for more workplace raids

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14 March 2017

Immigrant workers are bracing for workplace raids by the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency. Over the last several weeks, ICE agents have rounded up hundreds of undocumented immigrants in what immigrant rights groups call an unprecedented campaign by Trump's Department of Homeland Security.

Several of the raids were conducted at construction sites, manufacturing plants, restaurants and other workplaces. In other cases, immigrants were detained at traffic stops or were "collateral arrests," i.e., picked up by ICE simply for being at the wrong place at the wrong time.

The claim by Trump that the mass deportation of immigrant workers is aimed at protecting the jobs and living standards of native-born workers and legalized immigrants is a grotesque lie. On the contrary, the xenophobic campaign is aimed at intimidating and silencing the lowest paid and most exploited workers as a prelude for destroying the social and democratic rights of the entire working class.

The record-breaking deportations carried out by former President Barack Obama coincided with an offensive against wages and working conditions and a transfer of wealth from the bottom to the top of American society. Many employers exploit undocumented workers on construction sites, farms and factories knowing they will be too fearful to complain about wage theft, unsafe conditions and other abuses. Bloomberg News recently reported that some workers who have won wage theft cases are declining back pay checks from the Labor Department out of fear that contact with the government could lead to deportation.

This assault is being greatly expanded by the Trump administration, which has widened the criteria for who can be deported, established an expedited basis for

deportations without a hearing, and is tripling the number of ICE agents. Many immigrant rights advocates believe this will give a green light to the even greater exploitation of undocumented workers. In the meantime, the Trump administration is seeking to destroy whatever safety, health and labor protections remain, thereby condemning ever larger sections of the working class to the pariah status now reserved for undocumented workers.

Immigrant rights advocates are organizing training sessions to inform workers of their rights and preparing communities for even larger ICE raids. "In the last months, families have been preparing in the event of a workplace raid or if they are seized at home or while driving," Sam Robles, a spokeswoman for Workers Defense Project (Proyecto Defensa Laboral) in Austin, Texas told the *World Socialist Web Site*.

"People are finding ways to fight back. Austin is the epicenter of the fight of immigrant families. The sheriff here announced he would not comply with ICE, the same week the federal government issued an order against sanctuary cities. There is an anti-sanctuary city bill moving fast through the state legislature that would encourage racial profiling. There is a hearing Wednesday, and many high school students are coming to speak out."

Under Texas Senate Bill 4, law enforcement in cities, counties and on college campuses would have to hold an arrested person in custody while ICE agents look into his or her immigration status. If the entities fail to do so, they could be denied state grant money.

"People, including residents who have been here for years, are rushing in Central Texas to apply for relief," Robles added. "They may be eligible to stay because they have a child or spouse who can be sponsored. With these attacks coming on the local, state and

federal level, people are frightened and concerned.

“Right after the ICE raids we saw workers not showing up to their jobs because they heard a rumor about another raid or maybe being stopped on the way to work. Others went to work because they had to feed their families but didn’t know what was going to happen next.

“We did a joint study with the University of Texas that showed that almost half of the construction workforce in Texas is made up of undocumented workers. We’re seeing a delay in the completion of projects because workers don’t feel safe on the job.

“There is a labor shortage in Texas. That is why its cities, roads and schools are being built by undocumented workers who are part of our communities, our families. In Texas, we lose a construction worker every three days to an accident; one in five workers are injured on the job, and one in four suffer wage theft. It’s already tough on these workers, and now they are adding an extra layer of attacks. It’s already dangerous and stressful.”

Keren Zwick, from the Chicago-based National Immigrant Justice Center’s litigation practice, told the *Chicago Tribune* that she believes a return to worker roundups is inevitable. “We’re preparing for Postville-style raids,” Zwick said, referring to a 2008 raid at a Kosher meatpacking plant in Postville, Iowa, which was one of the largest single-site raids in US history. That raid resulted in the arrest of 389 immigrant workers, many of whom were eventually deported.

According to a 2015 Pew Research Center report cited by the *Tribune*, Illinois workers without legal status make up an estimated 11 percent of the workforce in leisure and hospitality, 10 percent in manufacturing and 9 percent in construction. “There are about 350,000 people in the state’s labor force without authorization,” the newspaper reported.

In Buffalo, New York, nine workers were rounded up on February 17 at a hotel construction site, while nearly two dozen were picked up at convenience store near an apartment complex building site.

“There were 23 people waiting to get a job, and they were snatched up off the street,” immigration attorney Michael Berger told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “There are a lot of Central Americans and Eastern Europeans doing siding and roofing work here in Buffalo. Many of the workers in the construction

unions are from Italian backgrounds. There was a time when the Italians were persecuted. And before them, the Irish. The idea that America was a perfect country always welcoming immigrants just isn’t true. When labor was needed, the US would say, ‘You can come in, but not your spouse.’”

There is widespread hostility to the efforts by Trump and his fascistic top aide, Stephen Bannon, to scapegoat immigrant workers. Increasing numbers of workers know that unemployment and low wages are not caused by immigrant workers but the relentless drive for profit by big business. But these conditions will not be fought by the Democratic Party, a capitalist party, which paved the way for Trump, nor by the unions, which have increasingly allied themselves with the billionaire president based on the ultra-right program of American First nationalism.

Nothing was ever won by workers outside the struggle to unite the entire working class—native-born and immigrant, black and white—in a common fight against the effort of the ruling class to divide workers along racial and ethnic lines. The entire working class must be mobilized to stop the witch-hunting of immigrant workers and to uphold the basic principle that all workers have the right to live and work in any country, with full citizenship rights.



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