

# Immigrant worker seeks refuge in church as ICE carries out raids in western Massachusetts

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13 November 2017

In recent weeks, ICE has unleashed a series of raids in Western Massachusetts, sweeping up and detaining undocumented residents and workers.

A recent high-profile case reported in regional news outlets involves Lucio Pérez, who fled Guatemala in 1999 and had been living in the mid-sized city of Springfield, Massachusetts.

Pérez came to ICE's attention in 2009, after he had gone into a Dunkin' Donuts in West Hartford, Connecticut while his children waited in the family's car. He was detained by local police and charged with "child abandonment." That charge was quickly dropped, but ICE was alerted to his case, and began deportation proceedings against him.

Lucio arranged to meet periodically with ICE and was granted a series of stays over the next 6 years. However, at his last check-in, he was denied further stays and ordered to leave the country by October 19. Faced with the prospect of being sent thousands of miles from his wife and children to a country he had not lived in for nearly two decades, Pérez defied the deportation order and sought sanctuary at a Unitarian Church in Amherst, Massachusetts, where he continues to take refuge.

ICE has classified Lucio as a "fugitive" and vowed to arrest and deport him. In an effort to counteract the huge popular support his case has received, the agency has painted Pérez as a criminal, with ICE representative Khalid Wells referring in an interview to Pérez's "numerous convictions for misdemeanor offenses." Wells declined to specify what those convictions were, citing "privacy rules."

Matt Cameron, a lawyer who has taken on Pérez' case, told the *Amherst Bulletin* that ICE is withholding

that information about the convictions because "they are all traffic-related, and because he's not a criminal at all...this is their favorite game now, to blame the victim."

On November 9, ICE executed another raid in the area and detained three farmworkers on their way back to their homes in Springfield. One of the men detained, Edgar López, had been deported twice by ICE to Guatemala and had returned to live in the United States both times, a criminal offence under federal law.

In a statement to the media, ICE referenced López' criminal background, including assaulting an officer and drunk driving, and referred to "prior misdemeanor convictions" in relation to Adolfo González-Velesquez, one of the other detained men.

Bill Newman, director of the Western Regional Law Office of the American Civil Liberties Union, which is organizing legal defense for the detained men, stated that "when ICE uses terms like 'other misdemeanors,' frequently that means minor traffic violations."

While both cases have been publicized in local media outlets, they are only the tip of the iceberg of the Trump administrations crackdown on immigrant workers in Western Massachusetts.

According to the ACLU's Immigrant Protection Project, which provides crucial support, including legal representation, to those swept up by ICE, these cases represent a mere fraction of ICE's activities in the region.

Javier Luengo, a coordinator at the Immigrant Protection Project, told the WSWWS that ICE appears to receive an alert every time state or local police enter information into a national database on someone they were unable to identify with a Social Security number

or government-issued ID card.

Asked how such a system could function, Luengo responded “we are not sure how they are doing it. They may be targeting certain words or phrases in the reports. Or perhaps they have a program that automatically detects it, but they definitely know.” Even if police do not positively ID someone during a stop, other information is collected, including—most crucially—their address. When that happens, ICE is provided with a new target for deportation and executes an arrest.

The Trump administration, in an effort to justify the brazen attacks on immigrants and whip up a lynch mob atmosphere, has also launched a concerted propaganda offensive, instructing the Department of Homeland Security to publicize weekly lists of alleged crimes committed by undocumented immigrants. One does not need to reach too far to find a historical parallel to this reactionary practice.

Just as the Nazi newspaper “Der Stürmer” published a list of supposed “Jewish crimes” in Germany in the run-up to the Holocaust, Trump’s executive order on immigration, issued last January, instructs the Department of Homeland Security to “make public a comprehensive list of criminal actions committed by aliens and any jurisdiction that ignored or otherwise failed to honor any detainers with respect to such aliens.”

Emails sent by the Department of Homeland Security obtained under the Freedom of Information Act and reported on by *The Intercept* reveal instructions issued to each local DHS branch to come up with “three egregious cases” to be published by the media. The email then states “If a location has only one egregious case — then include an extra egregious case from another city.”

The crackdown also contains chilling echoes of America’s pre-civil war past, when the Fugitive Slave Act, referred to by abolitionists as the “bloodhound law,” enlisted local police in the North to do the bidding of slave owners by slapping a \$1,000 fine on any law enforcement agent who did not arrest someone alleged to be a runaway slave. A simple affidavit was all the law required to “prove” ownership of a person with black skin. Like the Fugitive Slave Act, Trump’s executive orders and the aggressive operations of ICE seek to punish local governments and law enforcement

agencies that provide aid or protection to those targeted for capture.

Absent from coverage of these raids in the establishment media outlets is any discussion of the conditions that are driving people to risk their lives and flee to the United States in the first place.

The men recently detained in Western Massachusetts originally hail from Guatemala, a deeply impoverished country where the United States overthrew a democratically elected government in 1954 and then provided support for a series of military dictators as they waged a three-and-a-half-decade long genocidal campaign against indigenous peasants and the rural poor.

Guatemalan society was thoroughly brutalized by these events and today experiences an epidemic of violent crime, corruption and extreme poverty. One particularly bloody organization now terrorizing the population is the criminal cartel known as “Las Zetas,” formed from the most sadistic elements of the US-trained Guatemalan military after their demobilization in the mid 90’s.

Deporting Guatemalans and other Central Americans living in the US thus not only separates them from their families, it may equal a death sentence. As they seek to avoid this fate, hundreds of thousands of people are being made into fugitives by the very government responsible for destroying their countries’ social fabric.



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