ICE agents raid Ohio meatpacking plants, arrest 146 immigrants

Jerry White
21 June 2018

In one of the largest workplace raids in recent years, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents arrested 146 workers at a meat processing plant in northeastern Ohio on Tuesday. The raid was part of the Trump administration's campaign to terrorize and deport immigrant workers.

With helicopters circling overhead, dozens of heavily armed federal agents from ICE, its surveillance arm, Homeland Security Investigations (HSI), and local police descended on the Fresh Mark factory in Salem, Ohio, arresting 98 men and 48 women. Simultaneous raids were carried out on Fresh Mark facilities in Massillon and Canton, Ohio, where ICE agents seized employment records but made no arrests.

This was the second major raid of an Ohio workplace this month, following the storming of Corso's Flower & Garden Center landscaping centers in Sandusky and Castalia on June 5, which resulted in the arrest of 114 immigrant workers.

A video released by ICE showed agents preparing for the raid by checking their weapons, putting on bullet proof vests and studying satellite photos of the Salem plant before driving their SUVs into the factory's parking lot. Workers, still dressed in their white meat-cutting smocks, were removed from the plant and lined up at a loading dock, where agents checked their papers. Agents can be seen escorting away workers who have been handcuffed with plastic zip ties.

An American-born worker told the local media that she was "in shock" from seeing her co-workers arrested and taken away. Everyone she works with, she said, "were good people."

Several friends and relatives, some of them crying, crowded around the factory gates to inquire about the fate of their loved ones, while families and local churches scrambled to care for the approximately 60 children whose parents had been taken away. ICE agents handed out flyers with a toll-free "locator hotline" number for the families of those arrested.

"We arrived after the raid and we saw ICE agents taking the workers out of the plant and loading them onto buses," Justin Wier, a reporter for the Youngstown *Vindicator*, told the *World Socialist Web Site*. "Witnesses told us they put Americans and, of course, some of the Hispanic workers could have been American citizens, off to one side, while they asked for documents from the Hispanic workers." He said the newspaper had been told that all Hispanics were being taken away, even workers with proper documentation and permits for work.

The detainees, who were primarily from Guatemala and Mexico, were sent to the Northeast Ohio Correctional Center, where workers from the Sandusky raid are also being held. The private prison, run by CoreCivic, formerly known as the Corrections Corporation of America, is notorious. Detainees at the facility, which ICE contracts to hold 2,000 immigrants, conducted a hunger strike last year to protest intolerable conditions. The federal agency responded by putting all detainees on lockdown and depriving them of food and water for 27 hours, according to a relative, who said, "It's inhuman."

Although ICE says it released several Salem suspects out of "humanitarian concerns, such as health or family considerations," the agency said most of the undocumented workers "will be detained in facilities in Michigan and Ohio while awaiting removal proceedings."

A spokeswoman with St. Paul's Church, which helped care for the separated children, said, "A few people managed to send some text messages, but for the most part people couldn't talk to anybody. They were terrorized."

The Trump administration and its fascistic advisors cynically claim that their witch-hunt of immigrant workers is aimed at protecting the jobs and wages of native-born workers. Throughout history, however, the war on immigrants has always been aimed at the entire working class. The goal of capitalist owners and nativist politicians is to divide and weaken the working class and create an atmosphere of fear and intimidation so that employers can exploit both native-born and immigrant workers with impunity.

© World Socialist Web Site

The meatpacking industry, and Fresh Mark in particular, are notorious for exploiting immigrant workers with the full knowledge of the authorities. In December 2017, Samuel Martinez, a 62-year-old Guatemalan worker, died after his leg was ground up in an augur at Fresh Mark's Canton plant. In 2011, 20-year-old Marcos Perez-Velasquez, also a Guatemalan native, was electrocuted at the same plant while attempting to plug in a fan.

In response to the raids, the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) and its parent union, the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), which have 2,800 members at the three Ohio plants including those arrested in Tuesday's raid, issued a perfunctory protest.

Longtime RWDSU President Stuart Appelbaum said the union was "outraged by the actions of Donald Trump." He added that the union "will not stand for violence against immigrants, we will not stand for tearing families apart and we will not stand for the terrifying tactics of the Trump administration."

Appelbaum, however, made it clear that the union would do nothing to oppose the Gestapo-style raids, offering nothing more than verbal promises to "assist workers affected by this ICE raid."

For his part, UFCW President Marc Perrone issued a craven statement echoing the criticisms of Trump by leading Democrats and Republicans, which have focused on the brutal separation of children from their parents while not opposing the detention and deportation policy as a whole.

Perrone said: "Today's actions will only drive this nation further apart, while also spreading unmistakable pain among neighbors, friends, coworkers and loved ones… We urge President Trump and members of Congress to work together to fix our broken immigration system, and to keep the demands of due process and family unity at the forefront."

The unions have been fully complicit in the driving down of wages and return to conditions recalling those depicted in *The Jungle*, the 1906 Upton Sinclair novel about the exploitation of largely Eastern European workers in Chicago's slaughterhouses and processing plants.

During the 1980s, UFCW betrayed bitter strikes at Iowa Beef Processors, Oscar Mayer, Hormel and other meat processors. After Hormel workers in Local P-9 in Austin, Minnesota, refused to accept the industry-wide 23 percent wage cut to which the UFCW had agreed, the union put the rebellious local under trusteeship and removed its leaders. Minnesota's Democratic governor, Rudy Perpich, dispatched the National Guard to escort scabs and arrest striking Hormel workers in scenes that are eerily similar to the roundup of immigrant workers in Ohio. After the strike was broken, the UFCW created a new local based on the workers who had crossed the picket lines.

The influx of immigrant workers from Central America, Asia and Africa largely occurred after this wave of betrayed strikes, which resulted in a 50 percent decline in wages throughout the industry.

While Trump blames foreign-born workers for destroying jobs, just 18 miles from the Salem plant is the General Motors Lordstown Assembly Plant, where 1,200 workers will lose their jobs Friday when the automaker eliminates the second shift. GM, which made $12.8 billion in profits last year, is replacing full-time workers with low-paid contractors, with the blessing of the United Auto Workers union. At the same time, the company is using Trump's tax cuts to drive up the value of its stock and increase the money flowing to its richest investors.

Among workers there is a growing recognition that anti-immigrant chauvinism is being whipped up in the US and around the world to divert attention from those really responsible for the assault on the working class.

"It's time to wake up and recognize we are all citizens of the world who all bleed red," Beth, a fifth generation Chrysler worker from Kokomo, Indiana, told the WSWS. "I tell workers this is a trap to divide and conquer us, and it's being driven by corporate greed. They are trying to instill a fear in the working class that there is not enough money in the world for everybody. But there is more than enough money, food and resources. The problem is it's all controlled by the rich.

"It is not immigrants taking our jobs, it's the corporations like GM, which is laying off workers. They don't care about us. The rich never have enough, they want it all. We have to stop these atrocities, like ICE raids and taking children away from their mothers, and unify workers around the world."

The defense of immigrant workers is a class issue. Workers must form factory committees, independent of the unions, to mobilize all workers to oppose these raids and defend their fellow workers, including the launching of strikes and other industrial actions. They should demand the immediate release of all immigrants jailed by ICE and Customs and Border Protection, a halt to deportations, and full amnesty for all undocumented workers.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site