

“Nobody knows what is going to happen next”

Residents of Salem, Ohio, remain in shock after immigration raid

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In the wake of a raid by agents of the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and local police at a meatpacking plant in Salem, Ohio, members of the local immigrant community remained traumatized.

ICE agents seized some 146 workers in the raid, 48 women and 98 men at the Fresh Mark plant on June 19. The male detainees were taken to the Northeast Ohio Correctional Center where immigrants arrested in a previous raid on a garden center in Sandusky, Ohio, are also being held. The women were taken to the Geauga County Jail. Most of the workers were from Guatemala.

Following the raid ICE said it had released some 66 people for “humanitarian” reasons. However, at least some of those released were workers who were later able to produce immigration documents.

A *World Socialist Web Site* reporting team that visited Salem on Saturday found Salem’s downtown shopping area virtually deserted. Local residents told WSWS reporters that the streets were normally full of immigrant families on a Saturday, but that many people were now fearful of leaving their homes since the raid earlier in the week.

Veronica Dahlberg, the founder and director of immigrant rights group HOLA Ohio, called the events in Salem “an unfolding catastrophe,” warning that many of those seized by ICE agents now faced deportation. According to press reports there were about 35 families affected that had children and about 50 to 60 young people involved, with ages ranging from infants through to the teens.

Following the raid several local area churches and sympathetic residents scrambled to provide assistance to families of those impacted by the raids as well as legal advice.

Sister Rene Weeks from the St. Paul Catholic Church in Salem was one of those assisting immigrant families. She told the WSWS, “Nobody knows what’s going to happen next. The first night they certainly were afraid to be in their homes. The rumor was that ICE was going to go house-to-house.”

She continued, “We have a lot of people without work. So, they need to make decisions about their future. About 80 are still detained. Of the others who were released, some are free to go back to work and some aren’t. And others who work there have been warned that they shouldn’t return to work.”

She explained some of the conditions that drove immigrants from Guatemala to seek safety in the US. “Most of the people here in Salem are from the highlands of Guatemala. They are Mayan. Many of them speak other dialects. They may or may not speak Spanish fluently.

“There’s incredible violence in Central American countries. We have a man here whose son was pressured by a gang to join. He refused, and they shoved him into a highly electrified fence and he was killed. And there’s grinding poverty.”

WSWS reporters visited downtown Salem to speak to residents. Mark, a young worker said, “They’re hiring immigrants from other countries to do the work for the basest wage, and then they work their asses off. They take advantage of them. Companies like Fresh Mark actually go into Mexico and recruit people.

“They don’t care about the people that work for them, they just want to make sure their production needs are met, and they make top dollar.”

Mark noted that there were high levels of unemployment in the area and that immigrants and

native-born workers were often pitted against each other for jobs.

“You can’t afford the things you need. Transportation, electricity, water, rent. Then you have the ‘free health care’ (Obamacare), which is not free in any way—it’s the law.”

WSWS explained that the terror methods being used against immigrant workers would be used against the working class as a whole. The miserable conditions facing workers were not caused by immigrants, but the corporate and financial elite that was looting society’s resources.

“Yes,” Mark agreed, noting that immigrant workers and native-born workers were in a way both “victims” of the system.

Salem is an “outer ring” suburb of Youngstown, Ohio, an area that has suffered decades of deindustrialization. In a further blow to the area, General Motors laid off the second shift at the nearby Lordstown assembly plant on June 22, eliminating some 1,500 jobs.

Local residents told WSWS reporters that the Fresh Mark plant, which normally employs about 600-700 workers, was a major source of jobs in the area, despite starting pay being pegged at the poverty level of \$9 an hour. The United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) union is the bargaining agent for workers at the plant, overseeing the brutal exploitation of immigrant and native-born workers alike.

Meatpacking jobs were historically some of the better paying industrial jobs in the US due to mass struggles of workers in the 1930s and 1940s. However, starting in the 1980s there was a concerted attack on meatpacking workers, carried out with the collaboration of the unions, that resulted in a huge lowering of wages across the industry. Since then the meatpacking industry has relied heavily on super-exploited immigrant labor, aimed at keeping wages low and profits high.

Melissa, a local shopkeeper, said, she had formerly worked at Fresh Mark and her husband still worked at the plant, earning \$15 an hour after more than 30 years.

“It’s hard work! But if you want a job, you’re going to do the work. It’s a cold environment. You’re basically on your feet all day. A lot of it is on an assembly line, and you have to keep up. Carpal tunnel was a big problem when I started out there, but recently

they started rotating workers’ jobs to prevent that. It’s fast-paced because they want to get that product out.”

Melissa said there was a high turnover rate at Fresh Mark among native-born workers, but the immigrants tended to stay. “The Guatemalans are out there working doubles [shifts] and the company likes that.”

Asked what the attitude of local residents was toward the raids, Melissa replied, “Some people feel sad for them, and some people want them out of here. I think people really feel bad for the kids.”

The WSWS also spoke to Jose, an immigrant from El Salvador. He said he left the country in 1977 due to the civil war in the country sparked by grinding poverty and oppression by the US-backed dictatorship.

“It hasn’t changed since then,” he added. “The government takes all the money and the poor are poor and the rich are rich.”

Asked what he thought about the attempt to scapegoat immigrants for the deplorable social conditions in America, Jose commented. “He [Trump] wants us fighting against each other while he sits up there laughing. It would be different if everyone were united.”

He said that the attacks on immigrants did not start with the current administration. “This has been going on for years. So, it’s not exactly Trump’s problem. Obama did more things, but he was quieter. This guy [Trump] opens his mouth, and that’s why everybody’s talking about him.”



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