

Recently-released videos show federal agents assaulting immigrant workers in 2018 raid at Tennessee slaughterhouse

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Earlier this month, Eastern District of Tennessee Magistrate Judge Christopher Steger ruled in favor of a motion filed by the non-profit Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press on behalf of the *Tennessee Lookout* to unseal videos of an April 2018 raid on Southeastern Provisions slaughterhouse in Bean Station, Tennessee. The videos, which were ordered to be made public by August 19, showcase federal agents committing gross civil rights violations and physical assaults against Latin American immigrant workers.

In total, 104 immigrant workers were targeted in the raid, which was carried out by armed agents with the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS), Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and the Internal Revenue Service (IRS).

Among these workers, a handful filed a lawsuit in February 2019 against the agents and federal government. During the raid, agents took to verbally abusing workers, calling them “f**kers” and degrading them. Court documents describe one incident in which a worker was forced to urinate in public while being held at gunpoint.

The lawsuit identifies DHS Agent John Witsell as having punched workers and stood on the neck of a restrained worker for 30 seconds. In 2020, police officer Derek Chauvin employed a similar technique which resulted in the death of George Floyd, sparking multi-racial, multi-ethnic, and international protests against police brutality.

In his deposition, worker Geronimo Guerrero described his encounter with Witsell, telling the court, “He came and hit me in my face with a closed fist. At that moment, I got confused because I thought if it’s immigration, immigration wouldn’t do that because I

was not running and I was not a threat. At the moment when the officer hit me, I thought immigration doesn’t do that. So, I thought it was terrorists who had come in.”

After he was attacked by Witsell, Guerrero testified that two other agents continued the assault. “They tried to push me against the wall,” Guerrero stated, “but against the wall, there was a bucket of boiling water, so they pulled me to another wall, and they put me against another wall. I only said, ‘Why?’ I asked them why, but they never said who they were. They didn’t say anything.”

A video shows another worker, Jose Maurico Rodas-Guillen, attempting to seek refuge from the raid in an employee break room. Witsell and ICE Agent Francisco Ayala pursued him, eventually tackling him to the ground. Once on the ground, Witsell punched Rodas-Guillen as he was face down, and then stood on his neck while Ayala knelt on his back.

In his testimony, Ayala admitted that Witsell carried out his abuses despite Rodas-Guillen posing no threat to the officers. Witsell, for his part, has refused to cooperate in the investigation on the basis of an undisclosed medical condition, resulting in the court refusing him the option to speak in his defense or the defense of fellow agents.

Attorneys for the agents sought to prevent the release of the videos, claiming their release threatened to unleash civil unrest and violence against the agents. Judge Steger dismissed these claims, and in his ruling stated:

“[Agents’] assertion that allowing the public to see the arrest video and the written descriptions of it will incite civil unrest, taint the jury pool, and subject the

agents/officers to condemnation and potential physical harm is speculative and conclusory. This action was filed in February 2019 and the complaint contains detailed, graphic descriptions of alleged wrongdoing by law enforcement agents. Those assertions are purely conclusory.

“Members of the public should be allowed to view the video and reach their own conclusions as to what it depicts. The arrest video ... is information in which the public has a strong interest and which should be available to the public.”

A motion filed on July 29 revealed that the Justice Department attempted to bury the incident. The agency’s Civil Rights Division was notified of Witsell’s actions on March 28, 2018, and within days indicated that the division would not pursue an investigation. Witsell was also referred to ICE’s Office of Professional Responsibility which investigated him but declined to take any disciplinary action.

After reviewing court documents, the *Tennessee Lookout* reported on August 17 that now-retired US Magistrate Judge Bruce Guyton issued a warrant for the raid based on agents’ claims that it was intended to target slaughterhouse owner James Brantley. However, as the recently revealed documents have shown, the raid was in fact directed toward immigrant workers at the plant.

As the *Lookout* explains, “Agents spent nearly a year planning the raid, including obtaining dozens of plastic zip ties to use as handcuffs, securing use of a National Guard armory in a neighboring county as a makeshift immigration detention center and lining up buses to transport Latino workers, but never sought to determine if any of the plant workers were in the country illegally before storming inside the plant with guns drawn.”

The raid took place in the midst of the Trump administration’s increasingly fascistic attacks on immigrants. On the day the raid occurred the White House announced that Trump signed a proclamation to mobilize National Guard troops on the southern border. However, the anti-immigrant policies of the capitalist ruling class are a wholly bipartisan affair. The administrations of both George W. Bush and Barack Obama sent National Guard troops to assist in policing the southern border states.

Obama, who earned the moniker “deporter-in-chief,” bears special responsibility for preparing the ground for

Trump to carry out his anti-immigrant policies. The “comprehensive immigration reform” of the Obama administration paved the way for an expansion of the militarization of the border, workplace raids, and the deportation of immigrants.

As the Socialist Equality Party has repeatedly warned, the methods used to violate the democratic rights of immigrants are ultimately directed toward the entire working class. Therefore, it is necessary to connect the defense of immigrants with the emerging struggles of the working class against social inequality, war and dictatorship, the COVID-19 and monkeypox pandemics, and all other expressions of the capitalist system. The right of workers to live and work where they choose can only be achieved through the abolition of the reactionary nation-state system and the struggle of the international working class for socialism.



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