ICE detains travelers at US airports in expanding police state dragnet

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29 July 2026

The Trump administration has opened another front in its mass deportation operation, deploying plainclothes Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents to seize workers and travelers at airports throughout the United States.

Immigration agents have carried out arrests at check-in counters, arrival gates and jetways at no fewer than 15 airports in recent weeks, according to documents reviewed by the *New York Times* and interviews with lawyers representing more than 25 people from over a dozen countries.

Those seized include an engineer awaiting an extension of his work visa, several newlyweds married to US citizens, a former au pair with government-issued work authorization, and a Ugandan asylum seeker with sickle cell anemia who uses a wheelchair. None was accused of committing a crime.

The arrests are being facilitated by the Transportation Security Administration (TSA), which is supplying ICE with passenger information originally collected under the pretext of aviation security.

Documents obtained by the watchdog group American Oversight reveal that ICE and the TSA signed a formal data-sharing agreement in May 2025. Under the agreement, ICE supplies names to the TSA, which runs them through its Secure Flight databases and informs immigration agents when a person is scheduled to travel.

The arrangement transforms every airport security checkpoint into an immigration dragnet. Airline passengers who have expired visas, pending applications for permanent residency or unresolved requests for extensions can have their information turned over to ICE before they arrive at the airport.

Hundreds of thousands of immigrants and foreign visitors overstay visas every year. In many cases, a visa expires while an application for an extension, asylum or another legal status remains pending. Many have received work authorization from the federal government and have lived openly in the country for years.

Previously, people in these circumstances were rarely arrested while awaiting a decision unless they were accused of committing a crime. Now they are seen as “easy targets” to help the administration meet its quota of 2,000 immigration arrests every day.

“This administration is working diligently to ensure that aliens in our country illegally can no longer fly unless it is out of our country to self-deport,” the Department of Homeland Security declared.

The statement is a declaration that hundreds of thousands of people are to be stripped of the ability to fly within the United States. It also demonstrates that the airport arrests are intended to terrorize immigrants into abandoning pending legal claims and leaving the country.

On July 13, bystanders at Harry Reid International Airport in Las Vegas recorded plainclothes and masked ICE agents attempting to seize Phu Nguyen, a 57-year-old Australian citizen born in Vietnam.

Nguyen first entered the United States on a visa in 2013. The Department of Homeland Security claims he overstayed that visa but has not accused him of committing any crime.

Chris Motley, who was scheduled to travel with Nguyen on the same flight to Los Angeles, recorded an unidentified male agent wrestling Nguyen to the floor as he screamed for help. The agent attempted to handcuff Nguyen while simultaneously swiping at Motley’s phone to prevent him from recording.

An apparent second agent, a woman wearing a surgical mask and hood, stood nearby. A TSA agent positioned himself between Nguyen and the growing crowd, attempting to obstruct bystanders from witnessing and recording the assault.

As anger mounted among passengers, the agents abandoned the attempted arrest and walked away, leaving Nguyen on the floor with a handcuff attached to one wrist. Las Vegas police subsequently ran his name through their database, found no outstanding warrants and removed the handcuff.

Nguyen was examined by medical personnel and permitted to board his flight. ICE agents arrested him in Los Angeles the following day. He remains imprisoned at the Adelanto ICE Processing Center in California pending deportation proceedings.

One week after the assault on Nguyen, ICE agents seized 27-year-old Chantal Morales Rojas as she attempted to board a Southwest Airlines flight from Denver to Oakland, California.

Rojas, a former au pair and software engineer living in Oakland, had traveled to Denver to participate in an Ultimate Frisbee tournament. She passed through the TSA checkpoint without incident.

According to her friend Alicia Dantzker, an unidentified man in plainclothes approached Rojas and asked whether she would answer questions about her visa. Rojas declined. The man wore nothing identifying him as an immigration agent.

Several additional men in plainclothes then appeared near the gate and watched Rojas and her companions for approximately 30

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minutes. Feeling threatened, Rojas asked Southwest employees if she could board early. They agreed and scanned her ticket.

Dantzker said she and Rojas made it onto the jetway when the unidentified agents rushed it and the door behind the group was slammed shut. Dantzker began recording as the agents surrounded Rojas.

The first man claimed he had a warrant for her arrest and asked whether she wanted to see it. When an attorney traveling with the group repeatedly demanded that the agents produce the supposed warrant, they refused. The agents physically removed Rojas from the jetway and imprisoned her at the privately operated ICE concentration camp in Aurora, Colorado.

ICE claimed Rojas entered the United States in October 2024 and overstayed a visa that expired in January 2025. Her attorney, Laura Lichter, said the agency's account was false.

"Chantal came to the United States lawfully in early 2023 on a J-1 exchange visitor visa as an au pair," Lichter told Caló News. "She followed the rules of her program and, before it ended, timely filed an application with U.S. immigration authorities that allowed her to remain in the country while her case has been pending.

"For more than three years, she has continued to live here with federal authorization and has worked legally under employment authorization issued by the U.S. government," Lichter added.

Rojas lived openly, passed repeated background checks and received work authorization from the same federal government that has now imprisoned her.

Video of her seizure produced widespread anger. A GoFundMe campaign established to pay her legal expenses raised more than $100,000 in 48 hours. On Tuesday, an immigration judge set a $3,000 bond, allowing Rojas to be released while her case proceeds.

ICE has not disclosed how many people it has seized through the airport dragnet, and the TSA agreement will remain in force indefinitely unless terminated by the government. It is scheduled for review only once every five years.

The deployment of ICE at airports began during the partial government shutdown earlier this year. The Democrats responded with silence. Five days after immigration agents were dispatched to major airports, Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders and Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, now promoted as a possible Democratic presidential candidate in 2028, had said nothing.

At the time, the *World Socialist Web Site* warned: "ICE at the airports is particularly sinister. It will be used to block not only immigrants from leaving the country but also political opponents of the government. It is the physical prefiguration of a police state."

That warning has been vindicated.

In addition to the Democratic Party, the collaboration of the trade union bureaucracy in the expanding ICE airport dragnet was exposed by the July 14 seizure of Southwest Airlines flight attendant Lorenzo "Enzo" Thompson at Nashville International Airport after he returned from a work trip.

Thompson came to the United States legally from Jamaica in 2021 seeking protection from life-threatening abuse. According to a fundraiser organized on his behalf, he has no criminal record, possesses a valid work permit and has a pending immigration case.

Thompson is a dues-paying member of Transport Workers Union of America Local 556, the AFL-CIO-affiliated union representing Southwest flight attendants.

The union waited eight days before issuing a statement acknowledging that "one of our Members was detained" by ICE while at work. It did not name Thompson.

The statement said the union was "in communication" with his family and attorney and would "continue to monitor the situation closely." It informed members that Thompson's friends and family had established a fund for his legal expenses and expressed hope for a "swift resolution."

The union did not demand Thompson's immediate release. It did not condemn ICE, call a strike or propose any collective action by Southwest workers. Instead, it directed members disturbed by the kidnapping of their co-worker to the union's Critical Incident Stress Management team for "confidential peer support."

Nothing more clearly exposes the role of the trade union apparatus. A union member with work authorization is seized by the immigration Gestapo while performing his job, and the bureaucracy responds by "monitoring" his imprisonment and directing workers to a fundraiser and a stress management hotline.

The transformation of airports into checkpoints of a domestic police state could not proceed without the complicity of the Democratic Party and the AFL-CIO bureaucracy. They seek to isolate each victim, reduce every kidnapping to an individual legal case and prevent the mobilization of the immense social power of the working class.

The defense of immigrants and democratic rights requires the construction of independent rank-and-file committees at every airline, airport, workplace and neighborhood. These committees must organize collective action demanding the immediate release of Thompson and every worker imprisoned by ICE, an end to the TSA-ICE surveillance dragnet and the abolition of ICE and Customs and Border Protection. The working class must oppose the attack on all workers, regardless of nationality or alleged immigration status.

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