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Claims of ID fraud lead to largest raid in state history

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Postville, Ia. - The largest workplace raid in Iowa history Monday resulted in the arrest of more than 300 people and reignited the debate over immigration.

As two law enforcement helicopters hovered overhead, dozens of federal agents descended on Agriprocessors Inc., the nation's largest kosher slaughterhouse.

The 300 people arrested represent almost one-third of the plant's 968 workers, and federal officials said the number of arrests could increase. The number is three times as many as were arrested in a raid 18 months ago at the Swift plant in Marshalltown.

Months in planning, Monday's raid involved 16 local, state and federal agencies, led by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). They executed search warrants related to criminal activity, as well as a civil search warrant for people believed to be in the United States illegally.

"This is the largest operation of its type ever in Iowa," said Matt M. Dummermuth, U.S. attorney for the Northern District.

[Click here for complete, updated coverage \(including photos and videos\) of this ongoing story.](#)

Protests in Waterloo

About 200 protesters on Monday evening filled the sidewalk in front of the gates of the National Cattle Congress fairgrounds, where those arrested were being taken by bus.

They chanted "We have rights" and waved signs that said, among other things, "Honk for Human Rights."

Father Nils Hernandez of the Immaculate Conception Parish in Cedar Rapids came to Waterloo after he heard about the raid.

"This is inhumane," he said.

The protesters were faced with a half-dozen people who shouted "Send 'em back," to which the crowd responded, "We have a right to be here, too."

Feds allege rampant ID fraud

A federal search warrant said immigration officials have filed almost 700 complaints about immigration violations and criminal activity by workers at the Postville plant. The activity spans a two-year period, and some workers face multiple allegations.

Federal officials allege that as many as three-fourths of the company's workers at the end of last year were using fraudulent Social Security numbers.

Last November, the search warrant said, ICE agents interviewed a former Agriprocessors supervisor who said some employees were running a methamphetamine lab in the plant and were bringing weapons to work.

Another source alleged worker abuse, officials said in the warrant. In one case, a supervisor covered the eyes of an employee with duct tape and struck him with a meat hook.

The worker, who had entered the country illegally from Guatemala, was not seriously injured. He declined to report the incident for fear of losing his job, the warrant said.

Another plant worker told federal officials that undocumented workers were paid \$5 an hour for their first few months before receiving a pay increase to \$6 per hour. The minimum wage in Iowa is \$7.25 an hour.

Company officials could not be reached for comment. The plant, which produces kosher and nonkosher meats, opened in 1987 when butcher Aaron Rubashkin and about 200 Hasidic Jews from New York took over a defunct meatpacking plant. Hasidic Jews follow strict laws. It is a branch of Orthodox Judaism.

The Jews' arrival turned Postville, a community of 2,273 people on the Allamakee-Clayton county border in northeast Iowa, into one of Iowa's most ethnically diverse.

Rumors of raids elsewhere

Rumors had swirled across eastern Iowa for several days that one or more raids of meat-processing plants were imminent, but federal agents said Monday's action was limited to the Postville plant.

Gov. Chet Culver said he was told of the raid about 10:15 a.m. He appointed a group of state agency officials, led by Lt. Gov. Patty Judge, to help Postville deal with the raid's impact.

The governor said federal officials reassured his staff that those arrested and detained will have their rights protected. He also emphasized the importance of enforcing immigration laws.

"I have said before that I believe it is important that we crack down on illegal immigration," Culver said. "Illegal means illegal, not just those that are crossing the border illegally, but also those who are responsible for helping to make it happen."

State and federal labor officials confirmed Monday that investigations had been under way at the Postville plant for possible violations of labor laws.

The United Foods and Commercial Workers Union, which had been trying to organize Agriprocessors' employees, said it had alerted government investigators that the plant was exploiting underage workers and paying them off the books, said Jill Cashen, a union spokeswoman.

It's unclear whether the union's charges led to Monday's raid. Mark Lauritsen, the union's international vice president, wrote to ICE officials on May 2, asking them to refrain from raiding the Postville plant while the other investigation was under way. ICE officials had no comment on the letter.

Buses depart for Waterloo

Buses, apparently filled with detainees, began leaving Postville at 4 p.m. Monday, headed toward Waterloo. Each bus was escorted by two Iowa State Patrol cars, one in front and one in back.

The plant entrance remained blocked by ICE agents and state troopers.

The National Cattle Congress fairgrounds in Waterloo will serve as an intake center, said Barbara Gonzalez, an ICE spokeswoman.

The men will be housed at Estel Hall at the Cattle Congress and the women will be taken to local jails, she said.

It's unlikely anyone will remain at the Cattle Congress past Thursday, Gonzalez said. Federal officials have leased the fairgrounds through May 25.

'We are with you!'

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When the chained gates at the Cattle Congress site opened to admit a bus of detainees at 8:15 p.m., the crowd of about 200 people screamed their support.

Some were in tears as they shouted "We are with you!" and "We are all equal!"

Police looked on during the protest. Waterloo Police Department Lt. M.W. McNamee said the department had protesters move across the street to the sidewalk in front of the fairgrounds.

"You can't be on the property here ... but you can be on the sidewalk," McNamee told the growing number of protesters. "Unfortunately there's not a lot of area where you can be. This is not conducive to have a vigil."

The protest wrapped up just before 10 p.m.

Change in tactics

Immigration officials appeared committed to avoiding some of the criticism that followed the federal raids in December 2006 at six Swift & Co. meatpacking plants across the country, including one in Marshalltown. Those raids resulted in 1,297 arrests, including about 100 in Iowa.

Critics, including former Gov. Tom Vilsack, accused federal officials of violating the workers' Fourth Amendment rights against unreasonable searches and seizures. Federal agents also were criticized for separating parents from their children.

In Postville, ICE spokesman Harold Ort said that the children of anyone detained would be cared for, and that "their caregiver situation will be addressed.

"They were asked multiple times if they have any sole-caregiver issues or any child-care issues," he said.

Forty Agriprocessors workers were later released, with supervision, "on humanitarian grounds," said Dummermuth, the U.S. attorney.

"They assured us the kids were going to be taken care of," said Postville Mayor Robert Penrod.

Penrod said a majority of townspeople understand the plant's role in the Postville economy, while a small number would cheer the raid.

"There's people who hate the Hispanics, and there's people who don't like the Jews and would like to run them out of town," he said.

Register staff writers Jane Norman, Jennifer Jacobs, and Tony Leys contributed to this report.