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Hundreds of Workers Held in Immigration Raid



Jeff Haller for The New York Times

Federal agents and handcuffed workers at the Howard Industries plant on Monday in Laurel, Miss. Officials said at least 350 workers were in the country illegally.

By ADAM NOSSITER Published: August 25, 2008

LAUREL, Miss. — In another large-scale workplace immigration crackdown, federal officials raided a factory here on Monday, detaining at least 350 workers they said were in the country illegally.

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Jeff Haller for The New York Times

Howard Industries, one of the largest employers in the region, manufactures electrical transformers, among other products.

Numerous agents from Immigration and Customs Enforcement descended on a factory belonging to Howard Industries Inc., which manufactures electrical transformers, among other products.

As of late Monday afternoon, no criminal charges had been filed, said Barbara Gonzalez, an agency spokeswoman, but she said that dozens of workers had been "identified, fingerprinted, interviewed, photographed and processed for removal from the U.S."

The raid follows a similar large-scale immigration operation at a meatpacking plant in Postville, Iowa, in May when nearly 400 workers were detained. That raid was a significant escalation of the Bush administration's enforcement practices because those detained were not simply deported, as in previous raids, but were imprisoned for months on criminal charges of using false documents.

The mass rapid-fire hearings after the Postville raid took place in a temporary court facility on the grounds of the National Cattle Congress in Waterloo, Iowa. An interpreter was later sharply critical of the proceedings, saying the immigrants did not understand

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the charges against them.

An immigrant rights group in Jackson, Miss., the state capital, was critical of Monday's raid, saying families with children were involved.

"It's horrific what ICE is doing to these families and these communities," said Shuya Ohno, a spokesman for the [Mississippi Immigrants Rights Alliance](#). "It's just hard to imagine that this is the United States of America."

In Laurel on Monday afternoon, several dozen family members of immigrants waited for news of their relatives at the Immaculate Conception Catholic Church. There were several small children. A priest at the church who identified himself only as Father Sergio refused to allow interviews with the families or answer any questions, saying only: "People are afraid. We need to calm them. There are mothers and children involved."

Entrances to the sprawling plant, in an industrial section south of town, had been blocked off by ICE. A nearby fast-food restaurant was full of the blue-shirted agents, one of whom would say only that a "little inspection" was under way at the facility.

A woman entering the church grounds with four small children said several of the youngsters' parents had been detained. The woman, Mary Troyer, said she was a translator for many of the families.

"I don't like this at all," Ms. Troyer said. "I don't understand it. They have come here to work. It's very sad."

The ICE spokeswoman, Ms. Gonzalez, said the workers would be taken to an ICE detention center to "await the outcome of their cases." She said 50 would be "released into the community" instead of being sent to the center, for "humanitarian reasons," including medical difficulties or the need to take care of children.

She said no lawyers were present while the workers were being interrogated. "Everyone will have due process under law," Ms. Gonzalez said.

Late Monday afternoon, the grim-faced workers, some of them handcuffed, were lined up near white and silver buses as the rain poured down.

In a statement issued after the raid, Howard Industries, one of the largest employers in the region, acknowledged that it was "visited" by immigration agents trying to determine if its employees were citizens or otherwise legally authorized to work in the country.

"Howard Industries runs every check allowed to ascertain the immigration status of all applicants for jobs," the statement said. "It is company policy that it hires only U.S. citizens and legal immigrants."

Bill Chandler, executive director of the Mississippi Immigrants Rights Alliance, called the Laurel raid a violation of human rights.

"We're very disturbed at what's happened," Mr. Chandler said. "It's a real contradiction between our proclaimed values of hard work and family in Mississippi and the actions of local law enforcement, and ICE. I think it's a real affront to our values. They're creating their own terrorism by going after workers."

After the Iowa raid, the federal interpreter said many of the immigrants did not understand the charges to which they pleaded guilty. But federal officials said the judges in the cases believed that the guilty pleas had been made freely and voluntarily.

A version of this article appeared in print on August 26, 2008, on page A12 of the New York edition.

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