

Former Bianco owner going to prison

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BOSTON — Michael Bianco Inc., the New Bedford company at the center of a massive immigration raid on March 6, 2007, and its former owner, Francesco Insolita, both pleaded guilty Monday to federal charges involving a scheme to hire illegal immigrants.

Mr. Insolita, 51, of Pembroke pleaded guilty in U.S. District Court to helping to harbor and conceal illegal immigrants by allowing the company to submit false Social Security numbers to the government.

Mr. Insolita could be sentenced on Jan. 27 to up to 18 months' incarceration. He will serve at least one year and one day under the terms of the plea agreement. Mr. Insolita must also pay a \$30,000 fine.

The company will pay a fine of about \$1.5 million, as well as \$460,000 in restitution for overtime pay owed to workers, many of whom have been deported.

The Michael Bianco manufacturing plant, located at 89 West Rodney French Blvd. in New Bedford's South End, is under new ownership. Eagle Industries, a family-owned company in Missouri, bought the facility in November 2007.

Alissa Southworth, Eagle spokeswoman, says "There is absolutely no relationship with prior ownership and Eagle is in no way affected by the ruling."

Bianco pleaded guilty to 18 specific counts of knowingly hiring illegal aliens on various dates, from early 2004 to late 2006; fraudulently misrepresenting Social Security numbers and committing mail fraud when those numbers were mailed to the IRS and the Social Security Administration, and failing to pay many employees overtime from 2005 to 2007, according to the U.S. Attorney's Office.

"Our nation is rich with opportunities, and it is no wonder people from around the world seek to come here to work and live," U.S. Attorney Michael J. Sullivan said at a press conference announcing the guilty pleas. "The defendant's conduct in this case undermines our nation's principles and freedoms and the integrity of our immigration system, oftentimes placing legally operating businesses at a competitive disadvantage."

The raid on a chilly, late-winter day made national headlines. About 60 of the workers were immediately released to care for their children. About 300 were taken to a former military facility in Western Massachusetts. More than 206 workers ended up being flown to detention facilities in Texas.

Many immigrant advocates and even public officials derided the raid as unnecessarily harsh to the workers and their families. Gov. Deval Patrick and Sen. John Kerry, D-Mass., both criticized how the raid was handled. Gov. Patrick called it a "humanitarian crisis."

Bruce M. Foucart, the special agent in charge for the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement - Office of Investigations in Boston, stood next to Mr. Sullivan Monday and vigorously defended his agency's conduct.

Federal officials said the target of such enforcement actions is business owners who are breaking the law and taking advantage of illegal workers at the expense of legal residents who cannot get jobs.

"In the weeks and months following the worksite enforcement operation at Michael Bianco Inc., ICE faced incredible scrutiny and had to answer countless outrageous and unsubstantiated claims of mistreatment and unprofessional behavior on the part of our personnel," Mr. Foucart said. "All of those allegations were false. ICE employees performed their jobs professionally and compassionately during all stages of the operation and continue to do so today."

The raid led to the detention of at least 361 illegal immigrants.

According to federal immigration officials, 168 of the workers have been deported, 116 are awaiting a court ruling on deportation, 26 have received final deportation orders and will be sent to their home countries, and 16 had their residency changed to legal status. The exact status of another 35 cases in the system wasn't immediately available Monday.

Most of the deported workers were sent back to Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador.

Federal authorities will be working with the State Department to find deported workers who are due overtime pay from Bianco.

Mr. Insolia faced up to 10 years in federal prison and a \$250,000 fine when he was charged last year. His lawyer, Frank Libby, did not return calls from The Standard-Times.

Mr. Insolia founded Michael Bianco Inc. in 1985 as a small leather goods factory. From 2001 to 2006, Bianco landed \$230 million in military contracts to manufacture vests, backpacks and other equipment for U.S. troops. Employment quadrupled from 85 workers in 2002 to about 650 in 2006.

Mr. Insolia entered his felony plea a little more than a week after two co-defendants, former Bianco managers Dilia Costa and Gloria Melo, pleaded guilty to felony charges in the case.

Both women will be sentenced in January. Ms. Costa will serve two years of probation, including six months' of home confinement. Ms. Melo will pay a \$500 fine.

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