

US: children left abandoned by factory immigration raid

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5 August 2005

On Tuesday, July 26, between 30 and 35 children, some as young as three months old, were left stranded when federal agents arrested 119 immigrant workers at the Petit Jean Poultry plant in Arkadelphia, Arkansas. No provisions were made for these children as their parents were carted 70 miles away to a detention center to await deportation.

Many of these families, now forcibly torn apart, had lived and worked at the company for years. Of those detained, 115 were from Mexico, two were from Honduras and the other two were from El Salvador and Guatemala.

This surprise raid caught the town's mayor, the Clark County sheriff, and the plant manager by surprise, and no provisions were made to care for the children or to alert relatives. The federal agents failed to even contact the Department of Human Services, the agency that is usually responsible for abandoned children.

"A lot of those families had kids in day care in different places, and they didn't know why Mommy and Daddy didn't come pick them up," Arkadelphia Mayor Charles Hollingshead told the Associated Press.

An Immigration and Customs Enforcement spokesman claimed Friday that every one of the immigrants had lied to the agents, telling them they had no children. He later changed his story, admitting that the detainees did tell the agents that they had children left behind. Still, the agents did not allow the detainees to contact their families to make arrangements for their children.

Jose Luis Vidal told the Associated Press that his sister and brother-in-law left behind children aged ten, five and one when they were deported to Laredo, Mexico.

"The children are very sad, especially the baby. She cries all the time," Vidal said. His sister is attempting to

obtain a work permit to return to the United States. Vidal said his sister had been able to make a furtive call before she was taken away, while many of the others were not as fortunate.

Faced with the choice of either waiting in jail indefinitely for a hearing or being deported, many of the workers have agreed to immediate deportation. The burden of caring for the children has fallen on to the local community, mostly relatives, while some are still being looked after by a local church. In addition, many spouses were left alone after their husbands or wives were deported.

Ronnie Farnam, the plant manager, told the local *Sifting Herald News* that the immigration agents were abusive in their treatment of the workers. "I know they were arrested for working here illegally, but they're still human beings," he said. "(The agents) say they were arresting folks for identity theft, yet none of them has been charged with identity theft. It was an immigration raid, pure and simple."

The raid will also have a wider effect on the community as a whole. According to Farnam, some 60 workers have not shown up for the night shift since the raid occurred, likely fearing they will also be detained. Finding and training replacements for these workers will take months, during which time the plant will run at 40 to 60 percent of normal production. This means that millions of dollars that would have been paid in wages and taxes to the community will now be lost, causing a wider depression in an already poor area.

Despite the extremely harsh and punitive measures that they face at the hands of US authorities, the number of undocumented immigrants residing and working in the United States continues to grow.

The Pew Hispanic Center issued a report on June 14 detailing the demographics of undocumented

immigrants. The report estimated that as of March 2004 there were 10.3 million members in the “unauthorized population,” a majority of them living with families. At that time, an estimated 13.9 million people, including 4.2 million children, lived in households in which the head of the household or the spouse is an “unauthorized migrant.” Out of this population, 3.2 million individuals, mostly children, are citizens—having been born in the US—while other members of the family, usually their parents, face the threat of deportation.

Since the mid-1990s, “unauthorized migrants” entering the United States outnumbered the legal immigrants. In recent years, 700,000 “unauthorized migrants” entered annually, compared to 610,000 legal immigrants. A majority of the new “unauthorized population” have high school degrees and nearly 20 percent have some level of college education. Nearly one-third of these undocumented workers own their own homes in the US.

Even though a 1986 law prohibits employers from hiring workers lacking proof of proper immigration status, 6.3 million “unauthorized workers” were employed as of March 2004, comprising 4.3 percent of the civilian labor force. Families of these workers had an average annual income of between \$25,700 and \$29,900, depending on how long they have lived in the country, far below the average family income of legal immigrants (\$47,800) and the native-born (\$47,700).

They work in all sectors of the economy. A summary of the report stated, “While 3 percent of unauthorized workers are employed in agriculture, 33 percent have jobs in service industries and substantial shares can be found in construction and extractive occupations (16%) and in production, installation and repair (17%).”

The report also estimated that “about a quarter of all drywall and ceiling tile installers in the United States are unauthorized migrants, as are about a quarter of all meat and poultry workers and a quarter of all dishwashers.”

What emerges from this statistical study is a portrait of a vindictive immigration policy whose central purpose is to maintain a layer of repressed and underpaid labor to produce profits for corporate America. The practice of suddenly rounding up such workers at their workplaces and forcing them back to their home countries serves only to instill fear among this exploited population, while feeding right-wing anti-

immigrant sentiments cultivated by both the big business parties.

Washington’s reactionary anti-immigrant policy has claimed thousands of lives on the US-Mexico border, while separating families and leaving children abandoned as in the Arkansas incident. Both the administration and Congress are considering new measures that will only intensify these attacks.

Two competing bills before the Senate would inaugurate a new “guest worker” program that would essentially institutionalize the exploitation of immigrant labor.

Another bill before Congress, the Border Protection Patrol Act, would authorize governors of border states to deputize groups of vigilantes to pursue undocumented immigrants seeking to cross into the US. The bill would permit so-called Border Protection Corps to “use any means and any force authorized by State law to prevent individuals from unlawfully entering the United States.”

The connection between the anti-immigrant sentiments of the right wing and its hostility to the working class as a whole was made clear in a recent study by the Center for Immigrant Studies, a Republican-connected think tank, noting the record number of births to immigrants in the US.

The report warns that “higher expectations” of children born to immigrants in the US pose a danger of social upheaval. It blames “the labor unrest of the great depression” on “the children of European immigrants,” while asserting that “it was the children of black migrants from the South who rioted in northern cities during the 1960s.”



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