

More than 300 workers arrested in immigration raid on South Carolina plant

Hiram Lee
10 October 2008

Federal agents stormed the Columbia Farms poultry plant in Greenville, South Carolina on Tuesday, arresting at least 330 immigrant workers. Roughly 450 agents were involved in the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raid that began during a 9 a.m. shift change. As authorities burst into the plant, terrified workers ran for the doors but found them blocked by agents. Herbert Oscar Rooker, a janitor at the plant, told reporters he "had to duck back into the bathroom to keep from getting trampled."

Plant workers were rounded up by agents and directed towards a break room, with US citizens ordered to one side of the room and non-citizens ushered to the other. In addition to showing their IDs, workers were made to write out their names as well as their parents' names and their place of birth. US citizens and those whose papers were in order were given blue wristbands on which their names were written. Only those workers with blue wristbands were allowed to leave the room and return to their homes.

When news of the raid broke, friends and loved ones gathered outside the gates of Columbia Farms to learn the fate of the workers inside. Maria Juan, 22, was among the crowd, waiting nervously for news of her 68-year-old grandmother, a legal immigrant who had gone to work that day without her identification papers. Juan told reporters, "Families are going to be broken apart. There will be kids and babies left behind. Why are they doing this? Why? They didn't do anything. They only wanted to work." Her grandmother was eventually released.

Of the 330 workers taken into custody, 207 men and 123 women, approximately one fourth were released for "humanitarian reasons," including medical problems and childcare needs. Those released will continue to be monitored until they come before an immigration court

sometime in November. The rest of the detainees are currently being held at a facility in Georgia where they await deportation. Six juveniles were also arrested during the sting; those who could not be placed in the care of a "trusted adult" locally were instead placed in the custody of the Office of Refugee Resettlement.

Tuesday's raid was the culmination of a 10-month investigation into the hiring practices of the Columbia Farms plant. In June, 11 plant supervisors, all of whom hailed from Mexico originally, were arrested for being in the country illegally. The plant's human resources manager, Greenville native Elaine Crump, was also arrested and charged with 20 counts of filing false employment identification forms.

Regarding Ms. Crump's case, an ICE press release sought to remind readers that "as with any criminal case, a charge is merely an accusation and a defendant is presumed innocent until and unless proven guilty." The organization did not extend the same courtesy, however, to those rounded up Tuesday, when Barbara Gonzalez, an ICE spokesperson, told the press, "They are all illegals. We have charged them with being in violation of US immigration laws." Her comments drew protests from immigration attorney Dan Kowalski, who responded by pointing out that "a judge has to say that, they can't just say that."

As in the aftermath of the ICE raid on a Laurel, Mississippi manufacturing plant in August, there are reports that many in the large immigrant population of Greenville, South Carolina are now afraid to leave their homes for fear of another round of intimidation and arrests by authorities. Since the raid took place, Greenville has been described as a "ghost town" in local newspapers. There are further concerns that another Columbia Farms plant in the state may also be raided. Both plants are owned by the same company,

House of Raeford Farms.

The raid on Columbia Farms is only the latest in a wave of nationwide immigration raids intended to intimidate and terrorize large sections of the working class in the United States. In May, ICE agents raided the Agriprocessors Inc. slaughterhouse in Postville, Iowa, arresting more than 390 workers. Of these, 273 were sentenced to five months in prison. Beginning this weekend, the first of the prisoners are to be deported.

August brought the country's largest ever workplace raid, in which 595 workers were taken into custody at the Howard Industries plant in Laurel, Mississippi.

ICE raids have increased dramatically in recent years, with 4,077 deportation arrests in 2007 compared to 445 in 2003. These brutal displays of force, in which agents rush into worksites indiscriminately detaining everyone before separating workers by ethnicity and checking for papers--all practices that would be common measures in a police-state--have terrorized immigrant communities across the nation.

This violent expression of the US government's official policy of anti-immigrant chauvinism, supported by both corporate-controlled political parties and the trade union bureaucracies, serves to keep the country's large immigrant workforce in fear, rendering them all the more easily exploited. It also further demonizes immigrant workers, blaming their "illegal" theft of US jobs for many of the hardships faced by workers born in the US, obscuring in the process the real cause of social misery in the country--the capitalist system.

Such attacks on undocumented workers can only be expected to increase and intensify under present conditions in which the US is faced with its worst financial crisis since the Great Depression.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact