

New Bedford manufacturer, managers charged with hiring illegal aliens

by Bend_Weekly_News_Sources

BOSTON - The owner and three managers of Michael Bianco, Inc. (MBI) were arrested by federal authorities this morning in connection with alleged hiring of illegal aliens. Another individual was arrested on charges that he provided fraudulent identification documents to workers at the factory, U.S. Attorney Michael J. Sullivan of the District of Massachusetts and Assistant Secretary of Homeland Security for Immigration and Custom Enforcement (ICE) Julie L. Myers announced today.

Following the arrests, criminal complaints were unsealed today charging MBI owner Francesco Insolia, 50, of Pembroke, Mass.; payroll manager, Ana Figueroa, 40, of New Bedford, Mass.; plant manager, Dilla Costa, 55, of New Bedford; and office manager, Gloria Melo, 41, of Fall River, Mass., with conspiring to encourage or induce illegal aliens to reside in the United States and conspiring to hire illegal aliens. Luis Torres, 45, of New Bedford, was charged in a separate complaint with the knowing transfer of fraudulent identification documents.

As a result of today's arrests and search warrant, hundreds of MBI employees will be interviewed carefully to determine their alienage and immigration status. Aliens who are unlawfully in the United States will be charged administratively and placed in removal proceedings.

"It is understandable that many from around the globe would want to come to live, work and raise families here in the greatest democracy in the world," stated U.S. Attorney Sullivan. "However, this must be done in compliance with U.S. immigration laws -- not in violation of them. Employer accountability is essential to ensuring the integrity of the nations immigration system and knowingly hiring illegal immigrants is a violation of law, plain and simple, and those responsible will be prosecuted."

"Unlawful employment is a powerful magnet driving illegal immigration," stated Assistant Secretary Myers. "Egregious hiring practices, widespread use of fraudulent documents, and blatant disregard for the rule of law made this case a priority for ICE."

According to affidavits filed in support of the complaints and search warrant, MBI was established by Insolia in 1985 and specializes in the manufacture of handbags and other fine leather goods. Between 2001 and 2003, MBI won a number of Department of Defense contracts worth a total of approximately \$10 million to manufacture certain products for the U.S. military. In 2004, MBI received another defense contract worth approximately \$82 million. As a result of these defense contracts, from 2001, MBI began to substantially increase its workforce. It is alleged that from 2001 through 2003, MBI had approximately 85 employees. According to the affidavits, it is alleged that MBI presently maintains a workforce of more than 500 employees.

Based on information provided to law enforcement by a cooperating witness as well as an undercover

investigation in which an ICE agent posed as an illegal alien and obtained work at MBI, it is alleged that Insolia and other MBI employees working on his behalf have knowingly and actively been hiring illegal aliens to fill their expanding workforce. It is alleged that although MBI requires all prospective employees to produce proof of their identity and their eligibility to work, the company is aware that many employees have obtained fraudulent alien registration cards -- commonly known as green cards -- and Social Security cards. It is alleged that MBI management has even instructed prospective employees, including the undercover ICE agent, on how to obtain such fraudulent documents.

According to the affidavits, the undercover ICE agent informed several MBI management level employees, including Insolia, that she had come to the United States illegally from Mexico without papers. Figueroa was one of two managers who informed the undercover ICE agent as to how she could purchase a fraudulent Social Security card. According to the affidavits, after beginning work at MBI the undercover ICE agent met separately with Melo and Insolia and explained that she had come from Mexico without papers. Insolia agreed to give her a \$150 advance on her pay despite understanding she had no papers.

According to the affidavits in December 2005, when word reached MBI that ICE officials were conducting an investigation at a nearby New Bedford company, Costa announced over the loud speaker that Insolia had stated all MBI employees were free to leave the building. After the announcement, approximately 75 employees ran and hid -- some in their vehicles and others in boxes on the third floor at MBI.

It is alleged that Insolia continues to maintain a workforce of which the majority are illegal aliens. It is further alleged that he intentionally seeks out illegal aliens because they are more desperate to find employment, and are thus more likely to endure severe workplace conditions he has imposed.

According to the affidavits, since 2002 the Social Security Administration (SSA) has been sending MBI no match correspondence informing the company that many of the Social Security numbers (SSNs) that MBI was supplying the SSA on employees' W-2 forms were fraudulent or invalid -- oftentimes belonging to adolescents born sometime between 1991 and the present or belonging to individuals who were deceased.

If convicted, Insolia, Figueroa, Costa and Melo each face a maximum sentence of six months in prison, and a \$3,000 fine for each illegal alien hired by MBI on the conspiracy to hire illegal aliens charge; and 10 years in prison, to be followed by three years of supervised release and a \$250,000 fine on the conspiracy to encourage illegal aliens to reside in the United States charge. Torres faces a maximum sentence of 15 years in prison, to be followed by three years of supervised release, and a \$250,000 fine.

The investigation is continuing.

ICE has created a 24-hour toll-free hotline for family members of the illegal aliens who have been arrested to field questions about their locations and about the removal process. The phone number is: 866-341-3858.

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