

Immigration agents defend conduct during Illinois raid

by Daniel Pike

SPRINGFIELD, Ill - Workers for Quality Service Integrity Inc. began their overnight duties as usual Wednesday at the Cargill Meat Solutions plant in Beardstown, where QSI has a cleaning contract.

Just before 1 a.m., however, the scene changed. Outsiders suddenly entered the plant, ordered the third-shift laborers to shut down their high-pressure hoses and lined workers up against a wall.

So began a 16-hour detainment for a 26-year-old woman who worked for QSI, and who spoke to reporters about the federal roundup Thursday during a press conference at Sacred Heart Catholic Church, at 12th Street and Lawrence Avenue in Springfield.

"We thought that it was an emergency, like a chemical leak or something like that," said the Spanish-speaking woman, who was not identified by name. Her comments were translated by Diego Bonesatti, downstate organizer for the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, which spearheaded the media event.

"When we saw the backs of their uniforms, we saw that it said 'Police, ICE,'" the woman added while clutching her 4-year-old daughter. "One of our co-workers advised us that it was actually immigration."

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement raided the Cargill pork-processing plant with federal warrants to arrest 27 people - including two QSI managers - charging them with aggravated identity theft. Another 49 QSI workers are accused of being illegal aliens and face deportation hearings.

Little was revealed about the legal status of the three Mexican women ICIRR brought to Springfield Thursday, other than that they were awaiting court dates and had been released on their own recognizance. Presumably they are among about a dozen people released Wednesday for humanitarian reasons, such as concerns about child care.

All three worked for QSI, the Tennessee-based company targeted in the raid. One of the women, a 31-year-old mother of a 5-year-old son, wore a QSI jacket to the press conference. The third woman, also 31, is the mother of a 6-year-old boy.

Most of the comments were made by the 26-year-old woman, a three-year resident of Beardstown who said she came to the United States seeking a better life for her two children. She earned \$7.25 an hour at QSI.

She was held by ICE until about 5 p.m. Wednesday, then reunited with her family about 5:30 p.m. She said her husband looked after the children while she was at work and detained.

She said she understands why ICE did what it did, but she argued that most Hispanics in the small Cass County town cause no harm. Roughly one-third of Beardstown's 6,000 or so residents are Hispanic, due largely to the jobs available at the Cargill plant.

"We don't feel that we are hurting anyone by being here, because we work, because we don't steal anything," she said. "I understand that being here without papers is an offense, but we try to do the best we can. We pay our taxes, and we try to obey the law as best we can."

Through Bonesatti's translation, the women collectively and tearfully said they felt they were treated "like animals" during ICE's operation. They complained detainees were not allowed to change their wet clothing, were denied water and in some cases were denied access to bathrooms.

Contacted later, ICE spokesman Tim Counts said agents "used widely accepted law enforcement practices" during Wednesday's action. And after consulting with Lindsay Murphy, ICE assistant special agent in charge of the operation, Counts called the women's allegations "groundless."

All detainees were treated with the "utmost professionalism and compassion," Counts said, adding that requests for water or restroom breaks were granted.

Female agents "went so far as to handcuff those arrested in front as opposed to the standard procedure, which is behind, so it was easier to do things like get water or go to the restroom," Counts said.

He also noted that the only detainees released Wednesday were let go for humanitarian reasons. Because of that, Counts questioned the motivation of anyone released under those circumstances who would later complain about inhumane treatment.

Meanwhile, however, the Rev. Chris Brey, director of Hispanic Ministries for the Catholic Diocese of Springfield, decried the timing of ICE's raid, which occurred during the Holy Week leading up to Easter on the Christian calendar.

Most of the people who were arrested or detained Wednesday are Catholic, Brey said.

"For anyone who is Hispanic, Good Friday is a day of great devotion and great prayer, so I think our government, who we support with our taxes, knows as well the impact that it's going to have on the human family," Brey said. "It has a greater impact, obviously, on the human family during this most sacred of times. I believe our government knows that, and unfortunately is probably using that to their advantage."

Counts called such allegations "preposterous, bordering on irresponsible."

"I doubt that any reasonable person would believe such a thing," he said. "The timing of the operation was based on a variety of factors. It was a complex operation at the end of a three-month investigation involving more than 60 agents. Many dates were considered for the operation, some earlier than yesterday, some later. But all of the pieces came together for yesterday morning."

Bonesatti said the ICIRR is pressing Congress for a moratorium on worksite enforcement of immigration laws. Despite the precautions taken by ICE - such as involving the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services so that no children was abandoned by a detained parent - Bonesatti said workplace raids are "terrifying" events.

"With the moratorium, what we'd be saying is that (the government) focus on national security and on people with criminal records, instead of on the worksite program," Bonesatti said. "... Folks who are here to work, those are the people who would presumably benefit from such legislation."

Marti Jones, executive director of The Immigration Project, a downstate Illinois advocacy agency, has interviewed several of the released detainees. She said American citizens must decide whether it's good public policy to have laws denying willing workers the right to do so.

"This isn't a choice for people," Jones said. "They can't choose to work legally, because our laws completely make it impossible for them to work legally. So they have a choice. Either they don't work, they don't support their families, they don't improve their situation in life. Or they break this law that we have made."

While legislators and the public debate that issue, the three women and their fellow detainees face an uncertain future.

"The saddest was the pain that was caused to our children," Bonesatti translated as all three women spoke at once. "The oldest (children), they understand, and now they are afraid of going to school. And they don't want to leave us. They just want to be together with us."

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