

‘I’m Not Dangerous’

Danny Postel

The past six months have seen three of the largest workplace immigration raids in U.S. history. In May, the rural Iowa town of Postville was convulsed when 900 Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents stormed a kosher meatpacking plant and arrested 389 workers. In August, ICE agents descended on an electrical equipment factory near Laurel, Mississippi, detaining nearly 600 workers. And in October, the scene was repeated in Greenville, South Carolina, where 330 workers were swept up at a chicken-processing plant.

The humanitarian costs of the raids, according to a statement issued by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops Committee on Migration, were “immeasurable and unacceptable in a civilized society.” Children were separated from their parents for days. Those arrested were not immediately afforded the rights of due process. And local communities were, in the words of John C. Wester, bishop of Salt Lake City and chairman of the Committee on Migration, “disrupted and dislocated.” These raids, he said, “strike immigrant communities unexpectedly, leaving the affected immigrant families to cope in the aftermath. Husbands are separated from their wives, and children are separated from their parents. Many families never recover; others never reunite.”

The bishop called on the Department of Homeland Security, of which ICE is an agency, on President George W. Bush, and on then-candidates John McCain and Barack Obama to “reexamine the use of worksite enforcement raids” as an immigration-enforcement tool. He noted that immigrants “who are working to survive and support their families should not be treated like criminals.”

Having visited Laurel after the ICE crackdown, I must report that is exactly how the workers there have been treated and made to feel. The majority of the immigrant workers caught up in the raid were taken immediately to a holding facility in Louisiana. ICE released a number of women, some of them pregnant, on “humanitarian” grounds. But many of them were shackled with ankle bands equipped with electronic monitoring devices (pictured above). Several expressed their humiliation and shame—not to speak of their physical discomfort—at having been branded this way. For days, one of them told me, she avoided going out in public or to the grocery store. “It makes me look like a criminal, like a dangerous person,” she lamented. “I’m not dangerous.”

This woman told me she had come to the United States out of sheer desperation. She said she was unable to feed her children

in her home village in Mexico. Now, with deportation imminent and no means to pay her bills, she and her coworkers were facing a further harrowing fate.

Immigration raids, even large, media-covered ones, are selective and symbolic in nature. They are orchestrated to send a political message that the government is willing and able to enforce the law. But why penalize the least among us—hardworking people who earn very little and endure some of the harshest conditions in the American workplace? The Postville and Laurel plants both have long histories of taking advantage of their workers. Iowa’s attorney general recently filed charges against the Postville meatpacking plant for more than nine thousand labor violations. In July, religious and labor leaders joined more than a thousand marchers in the town to show solidarity with those seized in the ICE raid.

Indeed, religious communities have been playing a pivotal role in the aftermath of these raids. Catholic parishes have been safe havens for families scrambling to feed their children amid the turmoil. Immaculate Conception Church in Laurel and Sacred Heart Catholic Church in Hattiesburg worked virtually round-the-clock to feed and provide for the affected families.

To remedy what the U.S. bishops call “the failure of a seriously flawed immigration system,” they “urge our elected and appointed officials to turn away from enforcement-only methods and direct their energy toward the adoption of comprehensive immigration reform legislation.” That is now up to the new administration and to Congress. ■

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