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# Immigration Raid Draws Protest From Labor Officials

By JULIA PRESTON

An immigration raid at a huge North Carolina pork-packing plant provoked protests yesterday from union officials, who said the company, Smithfield Foods, had collaborated with the authorities searching for illegal immigrants to discourage its workers from organizing.

The dispute arose after Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents arrested 21 workers on Wednesday morning at the plant, in Tar Heel, about 80 miles south of Raleigh. The workers, 18 Mexicans and 3 Guatemalans, were in this country illegally and will be deported, immigration officials said.

Smithfield executives said the immigration agents informed them on Tuesday that they would be coming to question the immigrants. They said they had been working with the immigration agency since July to verify that the 5,200 employees at the plant had legal employment and immigration documents.

Dennis Pittman, a Smithfield spokesman, said the arrests caused no disruption at the plant, one of the largest pork factories in the world, which processes as many as 32,000 hogs in a day. "There were no helicopters or buses or even anybody in uniforms," Mr. Pittman said. "It was done in an orderly, professional fashion."

He said the raid was not related to a bitter standoff that began more than a decade ago between the plant and the United Food and Commercial Workers Union, which is seeking to represent the workers.

Gene Bruskin, an organizer for the union, said the company had started to cooperate closely with immigration authorities after a walkout by immigrant workers last summer. "My concern is the company is using the immigration issue to manipulate this long fight over workers' rights," Mr. Bruskin said.

Tension over the workers' immigration status has been running high at the plant since November, when more than 500 employees stayed away for two days after the company fired about 50 workers it said had used false Social Security numbers when they were hired. The walkout was unusual for a nonunion plant.

The company agreed to reinstate the workers and gave them 60 days to correct errors in their employment forms or present new documents to verify their identities and legal immigration status. About 48 percent of the plant's employees describe themselves as Hispanic, Mr. Pittman said, and 37 percent are African-American.

After conducting a review last summer, Mr. Pittman said, the company found discrepancies between the documents presented by 540 employees and the records of the Social Security Administration. The company told those workers that they would have to produce valid documents or face firing, he said.

Smithfield has been cooperating with a program in which the company vets its labor force and shares the results with the immigration agency, in exchange for some protection from disruptive, surprise immigration raids.

Immigration officials said they questioned the 21 employees on suspicion of links to criminal activity. Ultimately they were charged only with civil immigration violations. Matthew Allen, a senior immigration investigations official, said no criminal charges were planned.

Earlier this month, the union helped organize a petition drive by workers asking to take Martin Luther King's Birthday off as a paid holiday. More than 300 employees did not go to work that day, Jan. 15.

Mr. Pittman said it was not clear that the increased absences were a direct result of the union campaign.

Mr. Bruskin, the union organizer, said Smithfield had a history of threatening immigrants with deportation if they tried to unionize. The union has organized a national campaign to discourage consumers from buying Smithfield products.

The Tar Heel plant held elections in 1994 and 1997 to determine if the workers wanted to join the union. The union lost, but last May a federal appeals court threw out the 1997 election, finding that the company had engaged in "intense and widespread coercion" to block the union.

Stepping up enforcement actions nationwide, the immigration agency also deported more than 750 immigrants this week who were arrested in roundups in Los Angeles. More than 150 of the immigrants were fugitives from deportation proceedings, officials said.