

A corrupt and broken immigration policy

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The entire mess that constitutes U.S. immigration “policy” is summed up in the mass raid on undocumented aliens at a meat-packing plant in Postville, Iowa.

First, the magnitude of the problem. Federal investigators believe more than 700 of Agriprocessors’ 970 employees were undocumented. That’s a pile of illegal immigrants in one plant – but the United States as a whole has mountains of them, perhaps 12 million.

Many places, including much of Eastern Washington, have become dependent on the huge pool of illegal labor. Postville – the site of the raid – has seen its work force decimated by the arrest or flight of workers. Obvious solution: legal guest workers. But that’s in the reform legislation that Congress has repeatedly refused to pass.

Illegality breeds abuses. Agriprocessors has repeatedly been cited for worker safety violations. Undocumented workers have reportedly been required to work up to 14 hours a day – and have sometimes had difficulty getting paid for the overtime. Scared of deportation, they don’t complain to authorities.

The workers themselves employ fraudulent Social Security numbers, green cards and other forged identification to get hired. Agriprocessors appears to have been in on the scam. A federal sting operation there reportedly caught supervisors telling employees to “fix” their Social Security numbers.

Once arrested, many don’t get much in the way of due process. Of the 389 arrested in the Postville raid May 12, 297 pleaded guilty en masse and were sentenced in four days – a bum’s rush, not justice. They were given defense lawyers – some of whom sounded up representing dozens of defendants each – but they were not allowed access to lawyers who specialize in the legalities of immigration.

The crowning injustice has been the government’s general lack of interest in prosecuting the employers who profit from the status quo and drive the demand for illegal labor. It has been a crime to hire undocumented workers since 1986, but the de facto tolerance policy has encouraged companies like Agriprocessors to keep wages low – for legal and illegal employees alike – by hiring workers they can easily exploit.

Agriprocessors will probably get its comeuppance; the investigation appears to be headed toward charges against the people at the top. If the government is serious about discouraging illegal immigration, it will be looking for more scofflaw companies to bust.

A few hundred prosecutions would put the fear of God in employers throughout the country. But even if it were possible to arrest all of the country's undocumented immigrants, it would take 40,000 Postville raids to do it.