

East Houston workers detained in ICE raid

By JAMES PINKERTON
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Federal immigration agents have detained at least 170 workers at an east Houston plant as they conduct a major raid to investigate allegations that the company is employing illegal immigrants.

The raid, involving 150 to 200 agents, was launched about 7 a.m. Wednesday at Action Rags U.S.A, 1225 Port Houston, just north of the Houston Ship Channel.

Officials would not specify the information that led them to plan the raid, which is at least the second major immigration enforcement action in Houston in recent months.

Federal agents swarmed the Shipley Do-Nuts headquarters in north Houston on April 16, detaining 20 workers who they said were illegal immigrants.

The sign at Action Rags includes the phrase *ropa usada*, Spanish for "used clothing." A number of companies in Houston buy and sell used clothing, much of which is cut up for use as industrial rags.

The agents are questioning workers to determine their immigration status, said Bob Rutt, special agent in charge of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement criminal office in Houston.

Of the detained workers, 60-70 percent are women, Rutt said.

ICE officials have released 16 employees so far. "One was a U.S. citizen and another 15 were here in status and are legally authorized to work," Rutt said.

Ten female workers who are pregnant were detained. "We are processing them here for humanitarian purposes and will release them here under an order to report to an immigration court," Rutt said.

He said that four employees were transported from the facility for medical treatment, including a woman transported by helicopter to a local hospital after she fell 20 feet off a stack of wooden pallets in which she was hiding.

"Right now, we're still trying to secure the interior because we found several individuals trying to locate hiding spaces inside," said Greg Palmore, spokesman for ICE in Houston.

A plant supervisor who would not provide her name said the company employed 240 people at the site.

Rutt said no member of the company's management has been arrested, but confirmed that ICE is conducting a criminal investigation into the company's hiring practices.

Scores of ICE vehicles are parked at various spots at the plant, as numerous agents in body armor can be seen talking with workers and walking around the site.

At 9:45 a.m. an ICE helicopter was flying over the plant to check if any employees were hiding on the roof.

Workers at an adjoining plant have gathered in a nearby lot and along railroad tracks to watch the events.

Houston police are providing perimeter security for the federal action.

Calls to Action Rags were not answered Wednesday morning. Action Rags U.S.A.'s Web site describes the company as a leading grader and exporter of used clothing. "We specialize in selling used clothes to worldwide markets" including Africa, South America and Asia, according to the Web site.

Dozens of family members gathered on the street outside the plant entrance at Port Houston near Tilgham. Many of them rushed to the facility after employees called them on their cell phones during the raid.

Bernardo Olvera came to ask about his sister, Juana Maria Olvera, who he said was working in the plant and is in this country illegally.

"She doesn't have any papers to work there," Olvera said. "I'd like to talk to her to see if she could give me the keys to her husband's car.

"This is bad, what they do," he said. "But what can you do? The people here are just working. They're not doing anything wrong. These women are hard workers; they're not criminals."

Another relative of a worker said most of the plant's employees are women.