

Guilty pleas in hiring of immigrants 5 were accused of hiring illegal workers nearly a year ago after nationwide raids

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Five managers of a major pallet manufacturer based in Houston pleaded guilty Tuesday to charges they hired illegal workers, almost a year after federal authorities raided nearly 40 of its plants nationwide as part of an ongoing effort to clamp down on those who seek illegal labor sources.

High-profile raids that target not only undocumented workers but the executives who hire them are viewed by some as an overdue, effective deterrent. Immigrant-rights advocates remain concerned about the potential civil rights violations.

Earlier this month, immigration agents stormed into national chain restaurants here and in other U.S. cities and arrested about 220 illegal immigrants working for a janitorial service. Two executives of the targeted employer, Rosenbaum-Cunningham International Inc., or RCI, were also charged in the operation. In December, almost 1,300 illegal workers were arrested at Swift meat processing plants in Texas and five other states.

"The efforts are overdue," said Bob Dane, a spokesman for the Federation for American Immigration Reform, which advocates stricter enforcement. "Everything else has been words and policy. They are showing teeth and they are taking a bite out of it."

On Tuesday, James Rice, 37, of Houston, former executive regional general manager of IFCO Systems North America Inc., pleaded guilty in Albany, N.Y., to conspiring to employ illegal workers.

Robert Belvin, 43, of Stuart, Fla., a former general manager of the Albany IFCO plant, pleaded guilty to two felony conspiracy charges.

Up to 2 years in prison

The two executives could face up to two years in prison and a \$250,000 fine, said Assistant U.S. Attorney Tina Sciocchetti.

Rice, according to documents from Tuesday's court proceedings, relied upon a foreman, Abelino Chicas, to help staff the plants under his management.

Rice told prosecutors he knew or disregarded the fact that several of his Hispanic employees had invalid identification cards and work authorization papers.

Many employee's Social Security numbers were fake, the court records show.

Rice's lawyer declined to comment.

"Under the circumstances, we thought the only rational thing to do was to plead guilty," said Belvin's lawyer, Terence Kindlon.

About 1,200 immigrants were arrested during the raids.

Raid to be a model

Many of the employees were not being paid legal overtime rates. Managers claimed that supervisors were aware of the illegal practices, which they said were not unusual at IFCO.

"These events are deeply disturbing to the company," according to an IFCO statement released Tuesday. "IFCO did not set out as a matter of corporate strategy to hire undocumented workers or to exploit any of our employees. IFCO denies, without equivocation, any allegations to the contrary."

Three New York plant officials each pleaded guilty Tuesday to one misdemeanor. Dario Salzano, 36, of Amsterdam, N.Y.; Scott Dodge, 44, of Elmira, N.Y.; and Michael Ames, 44, of Shrewsbury, Mass., could face up to six months in jail and \$3,000 fines for each illegal worker employed, though they likely will get reduced terms because they cooperated, Sciocchetti said.

Charges were pending against two other IFCO managers in Houston and Cincinnati.

Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials, Sciocchetti said, indicated during a news conference Tuesday that the April raid operation would be the model for the types of investigations the agency will continue to pursue.

"The intent is to make the employers who are responsible for breaking the law as culpable as the illegal aliens who are coming into the country and breaking the law," she said.

The Mexican-American Legal Defense and Educational Fund supports ICE's authority to enforce federal law, but the civil rights group believes agents should avoid "racial" profiling during raids, said staff attorney Marisol Perez of San Antonio.

During one raid, she said, Hispanics were separated from non-Hispanics for questioning regardless of citizenship status.

Halt to raids asked

In December, MALDEF and other civil rights groups called on Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff to suspend the raids until passage of immigration reforms.

Business leaders in Texas have also taken note of the raids. The Texas Association of Business teamed with the Mexican American Legislative Caucus to press legislators for passage of reforms, including tougher enforcement on the border and in the workplace.

But raids are not the most effective tool for reforms, a TAB spokeswoman said.

"We think the best, effective way is to give legal avenues to those who live and work in this country," said Cathy DeWitt. "So we can leave our police and border patrol agents to actually patrol and guard against terrorists, not gardeners or other folks who work here"

This article contains information from the Associated Press.