

# Immigration Sweep Ends in 280 Arrests at 5 Plants

THE NEW YORK TIMES

April 17, 2008

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More than 280 workers accused of being illegal immigrants were arrested Wednesday by federal agents in coordinated operations at five plants belonging to Pilgrim's Pride, a major chicken-processing company, in the largest immigration roundup at a workplace this year.

Justice Department officials said they would bring criminal identity theft charges against many of those arrested.

Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents entered the plants after workers arrived for the morning shift, surprising the employees but not company managers, Pilgrim's Pride executives said.

"It wasn't a raid, in the sense that we were working with the government to help them apprehend the people," said Ray Atkinson, a spokesman for Pilgrim's Pride, which is based in Pittsburg, Tex. He said no charges had been brought against the company or its managers for hiring illegal immigrants. Justice officials said the company cooperated fully with the arrests.

Immigration officials said that more than 100 workers were arrested at each of two plants in Chattanooga, Tenn., and Moorefield, W.Va. Arrests were also made at plants in Mount Pleasant, Tex.; Live Oak, Fla.; and Batesville, Ark. The workers arrested were about 3 percent of the 9,400 employees at the five Pilgrim's Pride plants, Mr. Atkinson said.

The United States attorney for the Eastern District of Texas, John L. Ratcliffe, said some arrests were based on indictments returned April 1 by a grand jury in Tyler, Tex. They accuse immigrants of presenting real Social Security numbers belonging to other people when they were hired at the chicken plants.

The arrests are part of a strategy by immigration officials to bring tough federal charges against unauthorized immigrant workers caught in the common practice of buying or borrowing Social Security numbers to obtain work. The identity theft charges carry a maximum penalty of five years in prison upon conviction. Labor Department officials also worked on the investigation.

Five of 24 immigrants arrested in a Dec. 11 raid at the Mount Pleasant plant have pleaded guilty to identity theft, officials said. They said they had located several people whose

identities had been used, including at least one person who had been arrested for a crime that was committed by an immigrant using that person's identification.

Separately on Wednesday, agents arrested 20 people suspected of being illegal immigrants at the Shipley Donut Flour and Supply Company in Houston. In Buffalo, immigration officials said they arrested the owner, 10 managers and 45 workers at seven Mexican restaurants in four states. The managers were accused of importing illegal immigrants to work at the restaurants.