

Legally enforced chaos: Massachusetts immigration raid is the worst manifestation of bad immigration law

Houston Chronicle

March 11, 2007

Somehow, though it was meant to defend taxpayers, legal workers and oppressed factory employees, last week's immigration raid in New Bedford, Mass., ended up trampling all of the above.

Worse, the raid managed to traumatize an entirely different group: the 200 children left behind when their parents were seized from the Michael Bianco Inc. leather-goods plant.

The resulting municipal crisis exposed the stunning shortsightedness of Department of Homeland Security forces, which oversaw the raid. But in the bigger picture, it showed, again, that symbolic workplace sweeps are pointless substitutes for workplace/immigration laws that function: visa quotas that match labor demands and a reliable ID system for employers who really do want to comply with the law.

Currently, the New Bedford employers walk free until their court date to determine if they abused workers and guided them to buy fraudulent documents. Meanwhile, most of the almost 350 undocumented workers — who needed jobs so badly they put up with the firm's alleged mistreatment — are behind bars. Single mothers of very young children have now been released, federal officials say. But many of the estimated 200 children who were left behind remained cut off from their parents.

The stranded children initially included nursing infants; they still include small children stuck with foster care, relatives or, frighteningly, total strangers such as landlords, after their parents didn't come home from work.

"It's been a widespread humanitarian crisis here in New Bedford," Corinn Williams, director of the Community Economic Center of Southeastern Massachusetts, told the Associated Press. Added an outraged Gov. Deval Patrick, "Latchkey kids and some adolescents as well might have gone home after school with no one to take care for them."

To try to locate them and other children who fell through the cracks, Massachusetts has established a hotline. What a pitiful coda to a massive federal action that was weeks, maybe months, in the planning.

Undoubtedly, the plant's undocumented workers are subject to the law of the land. That, as they well knew, includes detention and possible deportation if found here illegally. But the workers' children are innocent, and between their poverty, isolation, age and illegal status, they are extraordinarily vulnerable.

The Department of Homeland Security, which masterminded a similar raid on Swift meat packing plants last year, already knows the fallout of such sweeps on minor children. Yet it doesn't seem to have improved its planning or coordination with state officials in any way when it raided the latest plant, in New Bedford.

As for the plant's managers, even if convicted they will be nothing more than unlucky anomalies in a nation where employers still hire 500,000 undocumented workers each year. One raid — or two, or three — will never dissuade illegal workers from crossing over. Perhaps, though, the raid will do something else.

With its embarrassing spectacles of cowering workers and allegations of mistreatment, a raid like the one in New Bedford should persuade employers to fight harder for Congress to pass rational immigration reform.

A comprehensive policy, one that would include tough border enforcement, more visas and a path to legalization for those already here, would do what the New Bedford raid clearly did not.

It would preserve public order while protecting workers, U.S. taxpayers, and — not inconsequentially — children.