

Minn. meatpackers sue over federal raid

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MINNEAPOLIS (AP) -- A lawsuit filed Tuesday claims that federal immigration agents who raided a meatpacking plant detained Hispanic workers, hurled racial epithets at them and forced the women among them to take off their clothes, while white workers were spared the harsh treatment.

The federal lawsuit was filed by Centro Legal, an immigrant rights group, on behalf of 10 workers at Swift & Co.'s Worthington plant who are in the U.S. legally. More than 200 illegal immigrants in Worthington were arrested Dec. 12 as part of a six-state raid of Swift plants that netted more than 1,200 undocumented workers.

The plaintiffs, all of whom were working at the Worthington plant when it was raided, claim they were detained and searched or interrogated without being advised of their constitutional rights, the lawsuit claims. None was charged with a crime, said Gloria Contreras-Edin, Centro Legal's executive director.

Federal agents "insulted, abused, and humiliated the plaintiffs on account of their race" and ordered female Hispanic workers to disrobe in front of federal agents, the lawsuit claims. White workers, meanwhile, were allowed to move about the plant freely during the raid and weren't subject to unlawful conduct on the part of agents, according to the lawsuit.

"This is about upholding the basic constitutional rights and freedoms of Americans - whether they are black, white or Latino," Contreras-Edin said.

The lawsuit claims civil rights violations, abuse, discrimination, unlawful search and unlawful detainment. It seeks unspecified damages and a court ruling barring ICE from conducting similar raids.

Tim Counts, a spokesman for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, said Tuesday that government lawyers hadn't reviewed the lawsuit. But he said agents did nothing wrong during the raid.

"The worksite enforcement operation at the Worthington plant was done lawfully and in full accordance with ICE policies and procedures," Counts said. "Each person encountered was treated with respect and has been given full access to due process under the laws."

Worthington is a city of about 15,000 residents near the Iowa border.

Centro Legal has also sued on behalf of Hispanic residents in Willmar who claim agents broke into their homes and illegally detained them during a sweep in April. Many Hispanic immigrants in that west-central Minnesota community work at a poultry processor owned by Austin-based Hormel Foods Corp.

ICE has also claimed its agent acted properly in that raid, which led to the arrests of about 50 people.