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Workers in raid get right to legal counsel

A settlement between civil rights groups and federal officials allows immigrants seized in Van Nuys to be accompanied by a lawyer at all meetings and interrogations.

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Civil rights groups said Thursday that they had reached a settlement with federal officials guaranteeing that workers nabbed in an immigration raid last month in Van Nuys can be accompanied by an attorney to all meetings and interrogations.

The settlement, finalized Wednesday, was reached after groups, including the American Civil Liberties Union of Southern California, the National Lawyers Guild and the National Immigration Law Center, sought a restraining order in federal court last month against federal immigration officials who they alleged had repeatedly blocked attorneys from accompanying workers to interviews. The settlement applies to about 130 workers at Micro Solutions Enterprises detained Feb. 7 on immigration violations.

Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials said the terms of the settlement were confidential but the agency was "very pleased with the result."

"It should be emphasized that ICE conducts work site enforcement operations lawfully, professionally and with extreme consideration to humanitarian concerns," said spokeswoman Lori Haley. Haley said the agency advises detainees of "their right to legal counsel and communication with consular officers by telephone or in person, after initial processing is completed."

According to Angelica Salas, executive director of the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles, ICE officials said the meetings to which lawyers were denied attendance were "administrative" and did not require the presence of legal counsel.

The organizations seeking the restraining order contended that the workers had a right to have an attorney present in those initial interviews, as well as any others.

"The government won't pay for the attorneys, but if the worker has access to one, they are allowed to meet with them," said Ahilan Arulanantham, a staff attorney with the ACLU of Southern California and one of the attorneys representing the workers pro bono.

Arulanantham said the groups hoped that the case would set a legal precedent.

"The government would have a hard time explaining why the rights of these people are different from those of others" detained in similar raids, he said.