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Los Angeles, CA

## **Los Angeles manufacturing company and its owner criminally charged in HSI probe targeting hiring violations**

LOS ANGELES – Federal criminal charges have been filed against a Van Nuys manufacturing company and one of its owners for hiring unauthorized alien workers and repeatedly taking steps to cover up the illegal hiring in an effort to retain the workers.

Yoel A. Wazana, 38, owner and production manager of Wazana Brothers International, Inc., which does business under the name Micro Solutions Enterprises (MSE), is scheduled to make his initial appearance Wednesday afternoon in U.S. District Court.

In a plea agreement filed Wednesday, Wazana agreed to plead guilty to one felony count of false representation of a Social Security number. Wazana admits in the plea agreement that he caused two employees to use the Social Security numbers of relatives in order to remain in the firm's employ after U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) began an investigation into the company's compliance with federal hiring laws.

MSE has agreed to plead guilty to one misdemeanor count of continuing employment of unauthorized aliens. In a plea agreement filed last month, the firm admits hiring approximately 55 unauthorized workers, and then continuing to employ them after the ICE audit had begun. The company admits that it knew, or deliberately avoided knowledge of the fact, that the individuals were not authorized to work in the United States.

The company's plea agreement represents a global settlement of criminal and civil charges against the firm. Under the terms of the plea agreement negotiated by ICE and the United States Attorney's Office, MSE agreed to pay approximately \$267,000 in civil and criminal fines.

Beyond the monetary sanctions, the plea agreement calls for the company to be on probation for three years, during which time it will implement a series of stringent measures to ensure it is complying with the nation's hiring laws. Those steps include retaining an independent compliance monitor to oversee the completion and maintenance of the firm's hiring records, and providing training to employees regarding federal hiring laws. The plea agreement takes into account the company's willingness to take responsibility for its prior criminal conduct and to implement a rigorous program to ensure full compliance with federal hiring laws in the future.

"ICE is committed to holding businesses accountable when they knowingly hire or retain illegal workers," said Claude Arnold, special agent in charge of HSI Los Angeles. "Employers who willfully violate our nation's hiring laws gain an unfair economic advantage over their law abiding competitors. Our goal is to protect job opportunities for the nation's legal workers and level the playing field for those businesses that play by the rules."

The charges against Wazana and his company are the result of an investigation into MSE's hiring practices that was initiated by HSI in 2007. According to court documents, shortly after MSE received notification in April 2007 that HSI planned to audit the company's payroll and hiring records, Wazana directed that about 80 of MSE's most experienced employees – at least 53 of whom did not have work authorization – be relocated to another manufacturing facility. When investigators requested hiring records from MSE on three separate occasions, the company failed to provide paperwork for those unauthorized workers. The plea agreements filed in this case also describe how, after learning of the ICE audit, Wazana conducted meetings with MSE's assembly line workers, instructing them to obtain valid work authorization documents and return with those documents, suggesting that he did not care if the documents were actually theirs.

In February 2008, HSI special agents executed a search warrant at MSE's Van Nuys plant. During the enforcement operation, special agents arrested eight current and former company workers on criminal charges and another 130 employees on administrative immigration violations.

The felony charge of false representation of a Social Security number carries a maximum penalty of five years in prison and a \$250,000 fine.

In 2009, HSI implemented a new, comprehensive strategy to reduce the demand for illegal employment and protect employment opportunities for the nation's lawful workforce. Under this strategy, HSI is focusing its resources on the auditing and investigation of employers suspected of cultivating illegal workplaces by knowingly employing illegal workers. In the last year, HSI has levied a record number of civil and criminal penalties against employers who violate immigration laws.

<http://www.ice.gov/news/releases/1209/120905losangeles.htm>