

# Los Angeles Times

## 51 illegal immigrants, 2 others arrested in raid at Palm Springs bakery

A former and a current supervisor are accused of hiring the workers in exchange for \$3,000 each.

By Anna Gorman, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

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A work site raid at a Palm Springs bakery Wednesday resulted in the arrests of 51 illegal immigrant workers and their current and former supervisors, who allegedly hired the employees in exchange for money.

Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials said the agency had opened an investigation into Palm Springs Baking Co. based on a tip in 2006 that the business was hiring unauthorized workers.

During the investigation, officials said, they discovered that more than 100 of 130 Social Security numbers were invalid or didn't match the names of employees. Many of the Social Security numbers belonged to U.S. citizens or legal workers from California and several other states, as well as to people who had died, according to court papers. About 25 people were using fake numbers, court papers said.

Both the current supervisor, 52-year-old Margarita Avilez Hernandez, and the former manager, 36-year-old Alicia Ramirez, face criminal charges and could get six months in federal prison if convicted.

Authorities said that the immigrants each paid \$3,000 to get hired at the bakery and that many of them told the managers they were here illegally.

"No business regardless of size or type is above the law," said Robert Schoch, special agent in charge of the ICE office of investigations in Los Angeles.

Phone calls to the bakery were not returned.

The workers suspected of violating immigration law are from Mexico, Honduras and Guatemala. Twenty-seven were detained and 24 were released on humanitarian grounds while they wait for future hearings.

Officials also executed a federal search warrant at the bakery and said the investigation is ongoing.

The arrests were the latest in a string of immigration enforcement actions at work sites

nationwide. Between Sept. 30, 2007, and Aug. 30 of this year, the agency arrested about 4,700 illegal workers on suspicion of administrative immigration law violations and 1,070 others on criminal charges.

Some employers who want to protect themselves from unannounced raids are joining a new ICE program called IMAGE, which allows the firms two years to work with immigration officials to get rid of undocumented workers. The city of Palmdale is a participant.

"We certainly credit the good faith of a company coming forward," Julie Myers, the head of Immigration and Customs Enforcement, said this week. The program, however, doesn't inoculate employers who knowingly hire illegal workers, officials said.