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The Politics Driving Mississippi's ICE Raid
By David Bacon
BlackCommentator.com Guest Commentator

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Laurel, Miss. - On August 25, immigration agents swooped down on Howard Industries, a Mississippi electrical equipment factory, taking 481 workers to a privately-run detention center in Jena, Louisiana. Some 106 were also arrested at the plant, and released wearing electronic monitoring devices on their ankles, if they had children, or without them, if they were pregnant. Eight workers were taken to Federal court in Hattiesburg, where they were charged with aggravated identity theft.

Afterward, Barbara Gonzalez, spokesperson for the Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), stated the raid took place because of a tip by a "union member" two years before. Other media accounts focused on an incident in which plant workers allegedly cheered as their coworkers were led away by ICE agents. The articles claim the plant was torn by tension between immigrant and non-immigrant workers, and that unions in Mississippi are hostile to immigrants.

Many Mississippi activists and workers, however, charge the raid had a political agenda - undermining a growing political coalition that threatens the state's conservative

Republican establishment. They also say the raid, which took place during union contract negotiations, will help the company resist demands for better wages and conditions.

Jim Evans, a national AFL-CIO staff member in Mississippi and a leading member of the state legislature's Black Caucus, said he believed "this raid is an effort to drive immigrants out of Mississippi. It is also an attempt to drive a wedge between immigrants, African Americans, white people and unions - all those who want political change here." Patricia Ice, attorney for the Mississippi Immigrant Rights Alliance (MIRA), agreed that "this is political. They want a mass exodus of immigrants out of the state, the kind we've seen in Arizona and Oklahoma. The political establishment here is threatened by Mississippi's changing demographics, and what the electorate might look like in 20 years."

In the last two decades, the percentage of African Americans in the state's population has increased to over 35%, and immigrants, who were statistically insignificant until recently, are expected to reach 10% in the next decade. Mississippi union membership has been among the nation's lowest, but since the early 1980s, workers have joined unions in catfish and poultry plants, casinos and shipyards, along with those at Howard Industries.

Evans, other members of the Black Caucus, many of the state's labor organizations, and immigrant communities all see shifting demographics as the basis for changing the state's politics. Over the last seven years, their growing coalition has proposed legislation to set up a Department of Labor (Mississippi is the only state without one), guarantee access to education for children of all races and nationalities, and provide drivers' licenses to immigrants. MIRA organized support in the state capitol for those proposals and Evans, who sponsored many of them, chairs the MIRA's board.

Earlier this year, however, the legislature passed, and Governor Haley Barbour signed, a law making it a state felony for an undocumented worker to hold a job, punishable by 1-5 years in prison and \$1,000-10,000 in fines. Employers are given immunity for employing workers without papers, so long as they vet new hires through an ICE database called E-Verify. It is still not known whether the people arrested at Howard Industries will be charged under the new state law. Evans says the law and the raid serve the same objectives. "They both just make it easier to exploit workers. The people who profit from Mississippi's low wage system want to keep it the way it is," he alleged.

In the week before the raid, MIRA organizers received reports of a growing number of ICE agents in southern Mississippi. They began leafleting immigrant communities, warning them about a possible raid and explaining their rights should people be questioned about their immigration status. When agents finally showed up at the Howard Industries plant, many workers say they tried to invoke those rights, and warn others that a raid was in progress. One woman, later detained and then released to care for her child, began to make calls on her cell phone to workers who had not yet come to the factory, warning them to stay away. "She first called her brother, and then began calling anyone else she could think of," explained her mother, who works in a local chicken plant. Both feared being identified publicly. "An agent grabbed her arm, and asked her what she was doing, so she went into the bathroom, and kept calling people until they took her phone away."

Howard Industries, like most Mississippi employers, has a long record of opposing unions. Workers there chose representation by the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers on June 8, 2000, by a vote of 162-108. Employment at the plant,

which manufactures electrical ballasts and transformers, grew considerably after the election, and the company now employs over 4000 workers at several locations in Mississippi. In 2002 it received a \$31.5 million subsidy from the state government for expansion, and at one point state legislators were all given HI laptop computers. "The company is very well-connected politically," says Evans, who noted that its owners donated to the campaigns of former Democratic governor Ronnie Musgrove, and then to Mississippi's current Republican governor Haley Barbour.

As it grew, the company hired many immigrant Mexican and Central American workers, diversifying a workforce that was originally primarily African American and white. The company has declined to comment, and released a press statement that said, "Howard Industries runs every check allowed to ascertain the immigration status of all applicants for jobs. It is company policy that it hires only U.S. citizens and legal immigrants."

During the organizing drive, the union filed charges with the National Labor Relations Board, alleging intimidation and violations of workers' rights. After the union and company agreed on a contract, more charges followed. NLRB Region 15 issued a complaint against the company for violating the union's bargaining rights. Roger Doolittle, attorney for IBEW Local 1317, says other charges allege the company threatened a union steward for trying to represent workers in the plant. In June, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration announced it intended to fine the company \$123,000 for 36 violations of health and safety regulations at the Pendorf plant, where the raid took place, and another \$41,000 in fines for a second Laurel location.

Tension between the company and union increased after the collective bargaining agreement expired at the beginning of August. According to one immigrant worker, who did not want to be identified, was not detained because he worked on swing shift. The union was asking for a wage increase of \$1.50/hour and better vacation benefits. Company medical benefits are also an issue among workers, he said, because family coverage costs over \$100/week, putting it out of reach for most employees.

Mississippi is a right-to-work state, and labor contracts cannot require that workers belong to the union. Instead, unions must continually try to sign workers up as members. In past years, according to other union sources, IBEW Local 1317 had a reputation as a union that did not offer much support to its immigrant members.

According to the swing shift worker, who did not belong to the union, there were just a few hundred members at the Pendorf plant, and in negotiations, the company used that low membership as a reason not to sign a new agreement.

To increase its ability to negotiate a contract, Local 1317 began making greater efforts to sign up immigrant members. Spanish-speaking organizers were brought in, and they handed out leaflets in Spanish, explaining the benefits of membership. They visited workers at home so they could talk about the union without being overheard or seen by company supervisors. According to the swing shift worker, many began to join, especially the immigrants who'd been hired most recently. IBEW's national newspaper, *Electrical Worker*, reported that over 200 had signed up last April, according to Local 1317's African-American business manager, Clarence Larkin. "It's a constant process to keep the union alive and growing," he told the paper.

That's when the plant was raided. Local 1317 will now have to try to negotiate a contract after the loss of many of its members, who were among those detained. Those members, who joined the union in hopes of better wages and treatment, instead have been imprisoned for days in Jena, Louisiana, a two-hour drive from Laurel. ICE

spokesperson, Barbara Gonzalez, would not provide an estimate of how long they might be jailed, but said "the investigation of their cases is ongoing."

The day after ICE agents stormed the factory, MIRA began organizing meetings to provide legal advice, food and economic help. According to MIRA director, Bill Chandler, Howard Industry representatives told detainees' families, and women released to care for children, that the company wouldn't give them their paychecks. On August 28, MIRA organizer, Vicky Cintra, led a group of workers to the Pendorf plant to demand their pay. Managers called Laurel police and sheriffs, who threatened to arrest her. After workers began chanting, "Let her go!" and news reporters appeared on the scene, the company finally agreed to distribute checks to about 70 people.

The swing shift worker was so frightened by the raid that he hadn't gone back to work after almost a week, and wasn't sure he'd have a job waiting if he did. "Everyone is still really scared," he said. The Hattiesburg American reported Friday that Howard Industries sent a letter to customers two days after the raid, assuring them that production would be back to normal by the end of the week, and noting that the company has not been charged.

Spokesperson Barbara Gonzalez claimed ICE waited two years after receiving a call from a "union member" before conducting the raid, because "we took the time needed for our investigation." She declined to say how that investigation was conducted, or what led ICE to believe their tip had come from a union member. The picture of a plant in which union members were hostile to immigrants was reinforced after the raid by media accounts of an incident in which workers "applauded" as their coworkers were taken away.

"It's hard to believe that a two-year old phone call to ICE led to this raid, but whether or not the call ever took place, that possibility is a product of the poisonous atmosphere fostered by politicians of both parties in Mississippi," says MIRA director Chandler. "In the last election, Barbour and Republicans campaigned against immigrants to get elected, but so did all the Democratic statewide candidates except Attorney General Jim Hood. The raid will make the climate even worse."

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BlackCommentator.com Guest Commentator, [David Bacon](#), Associate Editor of *New American Media*, is the author of "[Illegal People: How Globalization Creates Migration and Criminalizes Immigrants](#)." Click [here](#) to contact Mr. Bacon.

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