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Federal raid puts families in limbo

Immigration agents looking for stolen IDs detain scores in Hyrum

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HYRUM - If only for a few minutes, Maria felt like an "illegal alien" in her homeland - the United States of America.

She thought she was going on break from her job at the Swift & Co. meat processing plant here on Tuesday, but instead she and others were forced to stand in a line by U.S. immigration agents. Non-Latinos and people with lighter skin were plucked out of line and given blue bracelets.

The rest, mostly Latinos with brown skin, waited until they were "cleared" or arrested by "la migra," the popular name in Spanish for Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), employees said.

"I was in the line because of the color of my skin," she said, her voice shaking. "They're discriminating against me. I'm from the United States, and I didn't even get a blue bracelet."

Maria was one of hundreds of plant employees targeted by federal agents. But she and her husband were the lucky ones - later Tuesday, they returned home to their three sons.

The federal agents raided the Swift & Co. meat processing plant early Tuesday morning after arrest warrants had been issued for 60 workers, part of "Operation Wagon Train," a nationwide investigation involving undocumented immigrants using stolen Social Security numbers of U.S. citizens to gain employment.

The northern Utah plant is among six Swift facilities that were raided by immigration agents in Cactus, Texas; Grand Island, Neb.; Marshalltown, Iowa; Worthington, Minn.; and at the company headquarters in Greeley, Colo. In Utah, "Operation Wagon Train" started in August at the Swift plant, formerly owned by E.A. Miller, when the company complied with a subpoena asking for a list of about 1,200 employees, according to an arrest warrant filed in 1st District Court in Logan. Federal investigators compared the list with documents from Utah, Idaho, Nevada, Texas, California and Puerto Rico. In October, agents snapped photographs of license plates of all vehicles parked at the plant and compared vehicle registrations with the suspect target list and documents.

Swift has more than \$9 billion in annual sales and is the world's second-largest processor of fresh beef and pork. Swift President and CEO Sam Rovit said operations at the six raided facilities have been suspended. He denied the company knowingly hired illegal workers.

On Tuesday, as early as 8 a.m., agents began taking employees, many of them undocumented workers, away in white and black buses. Most were being held at a federal facility in Ogden.

Federal officials declined to disclose the location of the facility or the number of actual detainees.

In Cache County, minorities make up 12 percent - Latinos are 8 percent - of the population of 98,000 people.

Women were crying as they were handcuffed with plastic ties and put on the buses. Some weren't allowed to get their belongings from their lockers. Maria, who declined to use her last name, argued with an agent because she was getting the coat for her 34-year-old niece, Blanca, who was arrested.

"She [the agent] told me, 'Do you think it's going to be cold in Mexico?' " Maria said, holding back tears. "I've never seen people get treated *como animales*."

Maria was able to give Blanca a goodbye hug and promised to pack up her trailer. Gloria Alvanes looked for her husband at the plant. He called a relative before he was arrested and taken away. She said she is upset because she doesn't understand why the government is treating undocumented workers as criminals when most of them are just here to work. Alvanes has been married to her husband for five years, but he hasn't become a legal U.S. resident because the immigration process is taking longer than they expected. Now, she and her daughter, Marilyn Cornejo, a high school junior, are worried because they have a tight budget, it's 12 days before Christmas and there is no money for an immigration lawyer.

"What do they want us to do?" Marilyn asked. "Do they want us to drop out of school and get jobs?"

At five schools in Cache County, counselors comforted students who feared their parents had been taken into custody. Some school leaders explained to Latino students what was happening and made sure there was someone at home.

Latino leader Rolando Murillo, who happened to be at Mountaincrest High School in Hyrum, talked with about 100 students, including children whose parents are in this country legally but who fear "la migra."

"La migra is a nightmare for them," he said.

Father Clarence Sandoval of Saint Thomas Aquinas Catholic Church said church leaders called schools and had them give out the church's number if somebody needed help or child care for kids whose parents were arrested. As of Tuesday night, he hadn't received any calls.

"It takes away from being together for Christmas," he said of the raid. "The problem with the raids is they don't [consider] the impact on the families, especially the children."

After news of the ICE raid broke, U.S. Attorney for Utah Brett Tolman called for a meeting Tuesday afternoon with Latino leaders in Salt Lake City. The leaders asked Tolman to expedite the meat-packing plant workers' cases.

For Maria, it's not about immigration status, it's about "being brown."

She said she hopes the authorities are not targeting Latinos.

And she hopes no one ever has to live through an immigration raid, especially on the Day of the Virgin Mary celebrated by Catholics, which fell on Tuesday.

"My mom says, 'The raid was just a way of La Virgen de Guadalupe picking up all her people and taking them home to Mexico, where they'll be safe,'" she said.

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* Tribune reporters JUDY FAHYS and LISA ROSETTA contributed to this story.

Where to call

* Immigration officials have set up a toll-free telephone number, 866-341-3858, for families to contact for information on where their relatives are being detained. Operators speaking English and Spanish are available.

