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Immigration arrests denounced at rally

20 from Minnesota indicted; charges include identity theft

BY JOHN BREWER
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They came to tell the stories they say aren't being told.

In the wake of last Tuesday's raids at Swift & Co. meatpacking plants in Worthington, Minn., and five other states, a group of about 200 people gathered Monday afternoon outside the St. Paul offices of U.S. Sen. Norm Coleman to condemn the federal action and demand immigration reform.

After a 40-minute rally, a smaller group walked into the Republican senator's office and read stories about families affected by the Minnesota roundup of more than 200 workers on alleged immigration violations.

"One woman is pregnant and is terrified to leave her home. She'll only communicate by telephone," said Patrick Leet, an activist who collected stories last weekend in Worthington. "She's psychologically devastated."

The stories were told to Coleman's staff members; rally organizers were informed that the senator is out of the country. A few of the people visiting the office said the storytelling was necessary because the government is using accusations of identity theft as an excuse to round up undocumented workers.

"The only identity fraud that's going on here is people having to leave their countries" and their families to find work in the United States, said Eduardo Cardenas of the Center for Labor Rights.

The assembly came the same afternoon the U.S. attorney's office in Minneapolis announced the indictment of 20 of the 230 people detained in the Worthington raid.

According to prosecutors, a federal grand jury indicted 19 of the detainees on charges of use of an unlawfully obtained document for employment and use of a false document for employment eligibility verification.

Fifteen of those people also face an additional charge of aggravated identity theft.

Authorities said the 19 defendants used the Social Security cards and numbers of other persons to gain employment at Swift. They also used Minnesota ID cards, driver's licenses and other forms of identification to satisfy employment requirements.

A 20th person was charged with re-entering the United States after being previously deported.

Bruce Nestor, a Minneapolis-based immigration attorney, said 21 detainees are scheduled to appear in U.S. District Court in Minneapolis at 8:30 a.m. today. He reported that 15 other detainees had bond hearings Monday in immigration court. The timing wasn't coincidental, he said.

"The government is feeling pressure to file criminal charges because of the condemnation, the bad publicity that they've gotten because of this," he said. "They want to try to portray this as an identity theft crackdown. It's an attempt by the government to shift focus back to what they want the focus to be on."

A call to the U.S. attorney's office for comment was not immediately returned.

Despite the criminal charges, activists at the rally called the raids unwarranted and demoralizing. The U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement action netted 1,282 arrests at six Swift meatpacking plants across the country.

Mike Potter, president of United Food & Commercial Workers Local 1161 at the Swift pork-processing plant in Worthington, said he had no words to describe how the ICE sweep damaged his southwestern Minnesota community of 11,000.

"This can never happen again," he said through a bullhorn. "Never."

The crowd held candles against the cold wind on University Avenue as cars passed; some honked in support. A few people held banners. The largest read, "Reunify Families; No More Raids."

The Rev. Grant Stevensen, with St. Matthew's Lutheran Church in St. Paul, called on politicians to take a moral stand on

the immigration issue.

"We need our elected officials to step forward with a sense of decency," he said.

As the light faded, the crowd chanted.

"?S?, se puede!" they said, repeating a slogan made famous by the late labor organizer Cesar Chavez: "Yes, it can be done!"

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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