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## **ICE Workplace Raids Unmask Our Broken Immigration System**

John Daniel Davidson

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U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement carried out the largest single-state workplace raid in the agency's history this week, arresting some 680 workers at seven different sites across Mississippi. News reports chronicled the massive scale of the ICE operation, which involved some 600 agents and a Mississippi National Guard hangar stocked with 2,000 meals for those arrested.

Five major companies are involved, included Koch Foods, one of the largest poultry producers in the country (no relation to the Koch brothers) with an estimated annual revenue of \$3.2 billion. The raids, planned months ago, are a stark reminder of how broken our immigration system is, and how illegal immigration is driven above all by large corporations that profit off cheap foreign labor.

Most of the media coverage of the raids have been focused on the workers and their families. Images and video footage of crying children whose parents were arrested have been widely circulated, along with news reports that some of the children had no one to care for them and volunteers had to set up a makeshift shelter for them at a local gym (ICE later issued a statement saying that parents with minor children at home had been released).

This of course prompted the usual exaggerated moral outrage from Democratic politicians and pundits. "These ICE raids are designed to tear families apart, spread fear, and terrorize communities," tweeted Sen. Kamala Harris. "The cruelty knows no bounds," said Beto O'Rourke.

Such outrage is misdirected. It's not the president's fault that these companies employ large numbers of illegal immigrants, or that our immigration and visa system is as dysfunctional as it is. The fault lies with a political establishment has refused for decades to curb illegal immigration because it serves the interests of big business.

It isn't outrageous that ICE is trying, albeit ineffectively, to enforce the law. It's outrageous that the law does so little to deter employers who knowingly hire illegal immigrants. It's outrageous, for example, that our visa system for farm workers is designed to benefit a small segment of corporate agri-business who profit enormously from paying low wages to illegal immigrant workers. It outrageous that employers have no obligation to verify whether someone is allowed to work in the United States other than to accept authorization documents that "reasonably appear on their face to be genuine."

I asked Alex Nowrasteh, an immigration scholar at the Cato Institute, about what punishments employers face in the wake of an ICE raid, and he said the government usually levies fines and sometimes pursue criminal charges against owners and managers, citing several cases where employers have faces consequences.

But he downplayed the effectiveness of this kind of enforcement. “Generally, raids like these are big and showy,” he said. “They’re supposed to ‘send a message.’ Raids are never going to touch more than a small percentage of those working illegally.”

The total number of illegal immigrants in the United States is estimated to be about 12 million—although that’s probably low—and of these the vast majority are working age(according to the federal government, as of 2015 less than 20 percent of the illegal immigrant population is younger than 18 or older than 55.) That means there are millions of unauthorized workers employed by U.S. firms all over the country.

Staging ICE raids might send a message, but employers and illegal immigrant workers for the most part aren’t listening. Given the size of the illegal immigrant population, and federal laws requiring documentation for employment, identity theft and fraud are rampant in some industries.

Consider the raid at the meatpacking plants this week in Mississippi. There are no work visas for such workers. H-2 visas, the category for temporary workers, applies only to seasonal occupations, which means no meatpacking plants or dairies, which in turn means dairies and meatpacking plants often knowingly employ illegal immigrants.

What can be done? For starters, we could stiffen the penalties for hiring illegal immigrants, forcing employers to think twice before looking the other way when workers present obviously false documents or stolen identities—or worse, when employers aid them in that effort.

We could also expand the number temporary worker visas issued every year. For example, right now Congress only authorizes 66,000 visas for non-agricultural temporary workers a year—hardly enough to meet labor demands. We used to have a guest workers program in this country, and we could have one again, if we wanted.

Our entire visa system, like our immigration system, is a horrible mess and in need of massive reform. But there’s another aspect to all this that doesn’t get talked about nearly enough and that isn’t all that amenable to policy changes or law enforcement.

The fact is, all Americans—not just large farms and meatpacking plants—benefit from illegal immigration by paying lower prices for food. If industrial farms and meatpacking plants across the country refused to hire foreign workers and decided to pay competitive wages that would attract American workers, we would all pay much more for meat, fruit, and vegetables.

We have major problems with illegal immigration and border security, but let’s not kid ourselves that the illegal immigrants are the only one who bear the blame, or are the only ones complicit in gaming our labor system. Employers who knowingly hire these workers are also complicit, and to the extent that we’re okay with that, so are we.