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Basu: No one gains from raid

By REKHA BASU
REGISTER COLUMNIST

If you've logged on to the Register Web site in recent days, you've probably seen the reactions to Tuesday's raids on Marshalltown's Swift meatpacking plant and the roundup of 90 workers by federal immigration agents.

Most of them can be summed up this way: *Good riddance. It's about time. Lawbreakers shouldn't be rewarded. I don't want them stealing my job or my identity.*

It's the sort of response you'd expect when federal agents swoop down in force and haul away busloads of people in handcuffs. You'd assume there was major criminal activity going on.

You'd be naive.

Not only were most of the people seized in the raid guilty of no criminal wrongdoing - only civil violations of immigration law - but Iowa needs them as much as they need to be here. The meatpacking industry and communities depend on them. They're the engine that drives the economy.

That's why raids like Tuesday's are a charade, designed to appease political critics, but with no real prospect of changing anything. Government isn't going to allow the economy to collapse. Undocumented immigrants are too deeply embedded in the system.

Without them, who's going to process the meat, work the fields, wash the dishes, clean the hotels, lay the tile? Either Americans don't want those jobs or employers aren't too keen on those who do.

But we're willing to use and abandon immigrant workers trying to raise children with better prospects than they could expect back home.

For all the hype about stolen identities, only two of Iowa's 90 Swift workers arrested will be charged with identity theft. In fact, attorneys representing the undocumented said it's often Americans who sell their own Social Security numbers for a profit. There's a market for them because our laws make it next to impossible for low-skilled workers to get visas. Only 10,000 in that category are issued a year for the whole country.

The raid in Marshalltown separated four single mothers from their children, including one who was breastfeeding. The TV news showed a sobbing schoolgirl comforted by friends as her mother was taken away. One single mother was deported to Mexico Wednesday, leaving behind six children, according to Sonia Parras Konrad, an attorney for the MUNA legal clinic.

This is wrong.

Konrad and other advocates were denied admission to Camp Dodge Wednesday, when they tried to tell detainees of their rights or have them sign over paychecks to family.

Konrad, whose clinic is part of the Iowa Coalition Against Domestic Violence, says some detainees might have been eligible for visas under the federal Violence Against Women Act, as victims of trafficking or violent crimes. But on Thursday, by the time she hoped to gain entry, some detainees had already been deported - despite guarantees otherwise by Immigrations and Customs Enforcement.

ICE had also said - wrongly, apparently - that where children would be left without a parent, the parent would be released until hearings.

Even clergy were turned away. And two staffers from the Iowa Coalition Against Sexual Assault were prevented from handing out brochures during the raid because they couldn't prove *their* citizenship. They were threatened with arrest, according to CASA director Beth Barnhill. There's no law requiring citizens to prove their citizenship.

Who gains from this heavy-handedness? No one. The plants are back up and running. Even if these 1,282

are deported, other undocumented immigrants will fill their places.

Who pays for it, besides the displaced workers and their families? We all do:

- Schools. A quarter of Marshalltown students didn't come in Tuesday, and the district superintendent said the decline could have a long-term impact.
- The meat-processing industry. Swift, the third largest processor of beef and pork, lost 9 percent of its work force.
- Consumers, because meat prices could soar if companies process less meat.
- Iowa communities, which Mexican immigrants have been helping to revitalize in the face of population losses.

It's time for lawmakers to finally stop the charade and pass reasonable legislation increasing immigration quotas and providing workers here a path to legalization. In the meantime, we need a moratorium on heartless, meaningless raids like this one.

REKHA BASU can be reached at rbasu@dmreg.com or (515) 284-8584.