

Feds to target Arizona employers

FRONT PAGE

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Federal authorities in Arizona are expected to crack down soon on businesses that knowingly hire undocumented workers, joining a nationwide effort to bust employers most responsible for the job magnet that attracts illegal immigrants to the United States.

Russell "Pete" Ahr, a spokesman

for Immigration and Customs Enforcement in Phoenix, said the agency's worksite enforcement unit has been beefed up to pursue felony charges against those who willfully use unauthorized labor.

During raids, some illegal immigrants are likely to be arrested for deportation. But, Ahr emphasized, ICE agents will not conduct random sweeps to round up undocumented workers. They will use tips and intelligence to identify business operators who purposely violate the law.

"It is active now," Ahr said of the unit. "It is conducting investigations. There are going to be visible results in the foreseeable future... We're not fining (companies) anymore. We're going after criminal indictments against the owners."

Ahr declined to say what industries or types of businesses may be targeted.

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Employers face immigration crackdown

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The crackdown comes at a time when illegal immigration is a hot political issue, with grass-roots lobbying, election campaigns and congressional feuding over reform.

In December, the Republican-controlled House passed an enforcement-only measure that calls for more border security and mandatory verification of employment documents. A bipartisan Senate bill would

enhance enforcement, but it also provides for the legalization of undocumented immigrants who are vital to some U.S. industries.

Congress adjourned last week without taking final action on either measure.

The workplace enforcement effort evolved gradually, with ICE agents in some jurisdictions cracking down on employers as early as 2004. The Department of Homeland Security publicly touted the program in April, when ICE agents

arrested seven managers from a pallet-manufacturing company. During raids at company sites in 26 states, including Arizona, 1,187 workers were discovered with false documents.

Since then, the prosecution of employers has accelerated. As of August of fiscal 2006, agents had arrested 668 business owners or managers in the employment of undocumented workers, 525 more than in the seven prior years combined.

Although the increase seems dramatic, the total number of prosecutions remains fractional in an economy with an estimated 4.9 million private employers and 7.2 million undocumented workers. By some estimates, undocumented workers make up 5 percent of the nation's workforce.

Against that backdrop, critics say a smattering of criminal cases suggests political tokenism.

Steven Camarota, director of research at the Center for Immigration Studies, an immigration control organization in Washington, D.C., said President Bush is trying to placate conservative Republicans in hopes they'll accept an amnesty program.

Camarota added that, although he welcomes any enforcement increase, the prosecutions are merely an increase "from nothing to a little."

Do-nothing history

The ICE campaign comes after years of ignoring those who hire undocumented immigrants, largely due to politics.

In the 1990s, administrators at ICE's predecessor, the Immigration and Naturalization Service, tried to shut off the unauthorized labor force in several industries, only to be beaten down. In Nebraska, for example, raids on meatpacking plants, one of the state's key businesses, prompted such a backlash from community and congressional leaders that the INS gave up. The same happened in other states where key industries were targeted.

The pressure from industry, combined with advocacy from civil rights groups opposed to immigration sweeps, virtually eliminated interior enforcement programs.

Brazen violators occasionally were hit with civil sanctions, but ICE officials acknowledge the fines were so insignificant that employers shrugged them off as a cost of doing business.

Enforcement efforts against business owners are hampered by other factors:

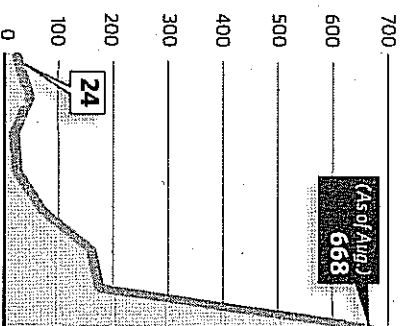
- Convictions are difficult to obtain because investigators must prove an employer knowingly hired unauthorized workers.

- ICE agents have been preoccupied with national security. Since 9/11, their top priorities have been identifying potential terrorists and screening employees at airports and other key installations.

Worksite enforcement

U.S. criminal arrests of business owners and managers who employ undocumented workers have increased dramatically in the past three years.

Criminal arrests



The result: In 2002, only 19 business operators nationwide were arrested for immigration violations.

Hot-button issue

If terrorism changed ICE's priorities, it also helped make immigration a hot-button political issue. Suddenly, the Bush administration was withering under criticism. Some complained about the lack of raids to find illegal workers. Others groused about the hypocrisy of targeting immigrants while doing nothing to business owners who profit from them.

Bush has long argued for a comprehensive reform measure that includes border security, interior enforcement and a legalized immigrant workforce.

Advocates on both sides say the ICE campaign was spawned by politics rather than a sincere effort to crack down on employers.

"These are strategies to appeal to a very conservative base," said Michele Waslin, director of immigration policy research for the National Council of La Raza.

Waslin said history has shown that enforcement won't deter illegal immigration because it fails to recognize the need for low-cost labor. Instead, she said, worksite raids spread fear.

Ahr, the ICE spokesman, said that his agency is reversing a long history of lax enforcement and that the job has to be done incrementally. Already, he said, more companies are signing up for a voluntary program that enables them to verify employee documents.

"As more of these criminal cases are made, with the publicity they get, we expect people to say, 'Golly, I might not be next on the chopping block, but I might be next,'" Ahr said. "(Illegal immigration) is driven by the magnet of illegal employment. It's all well and good to bolster the border. But, unless you diminish the magnet, that border effort won't work."