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Immigration raid tactics draw congressional ire

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Lawmakers on Thursday questioned the legality and effectiveness of the government's tactics in a May raid that led to the arrest of nearly 400 immigrants.

The crackdown on a kosher meatpacking plant in Postville, Iowa — called Agriprocessors — represented the largest single immigration raid in the nation's history. Most of the workers, who faced charges of aggravated identity theft for using immigration or Social Security numbers that did not belong to them, accepted plea agreements on a lesser charge of Social Security fraud. Most now face five months of jail followed by deportation.

The raid has come under fire from immigration reform groups and now lawmakers who objected to group prosecutions that they say violated due process and who criticized the decision to disproportionately go after workers instead of employers.

"This looks and feels like a cattle auction, not a criminal prosecution in the United States," said Rep. Zoe Lofgren, D-Calif., a former immigration lawyer and chair of the House Judiciary subcommittee on immigration, which held a five-hour hearing Thursday on the Postville raid.

The workers were given seven days to decide whether to accept the plea agreement, and they appeared in groups of 10 at the plea hearings.

"Defendants did not know what a Social Security number was," said Erik Camayd-Freixas, one of the interpreters brought in to translate at the court proceedings.

Deborah Rhodes, senior associate deputy attorney general at the Department of Justice, defended the "fast-tracking" process, which she said averted flooding the courts and

resulted in reduced sentences.

Lawmakers also expressed concern about the government's priorities, arguing that the mass raid complicated an existing investigation into labor, food safety and environmental violations at the Agriprocessors plant.

Rep. Bruce Braley, D-Iowa, whose district borders Postville, said he was concerned that rounding up, jailing and deporting the plant's workers would impede the Department of Labor's investigation.

"Unless we enforce our laws equally against both employees and employers who break the law, we will continue to have a serious problem with illegal immigration in this country," Braley said.

On the Net:

Immigration and Customs Enforcement: <http://www.ice.gov/>

House Judiciary Committee: <http://judiciary.house.gov/>



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