

NEWS JAN 10 2018, 10:11 PM ET

Immigration agents raid 7-Eleven stores nationwide, arrest 21 people in biggest crackdown of Trump era

by CORKY SIEMASZKO

U.S. immigration agents raided dozens of 7-Eleven stores before dawn Wednesday and arrested 21 people in the biggest crackdown on a company suspected of hiring undocumented workers since President Donald Trump took office.

Some 98 of the convenience stores nationwide — from Los Angeles to New York — were targeted by agents from Immigration and Customs Enforcement, whose top official described the raids as a warning to other companies that may have unauthorized employees on their payrolls.



U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents serve an employment audit notice at a 7-Eleven convenience store Won Jan. 10, 2018, in Los Angeles. Agents said they targeted about 100 7-Eleven stores nationwide Wednesday to open employment audits and interview workers. Chris Carlson / AP

“Today’s actions send a strong message to U.S. businesses that hire and employ an illegal workforce,” ICE’s Acting Director Thomas D. Homan said in a statement. “ICE will enforce the law, and if you are found to be breaking the law, you will be held accountable.”

Homan did not say why ICE went after the Irving, Texas-based convenience store chain, which has 60,000 franchises worldwide and is famous for its Slurpee drinks. ICE hit stores in 17 states and Washington, D.C., and gave managers and franchise owners three days to provide the agency with the immigration status of their workers.

“Businesses that hire illegal workers are a pull factor for illegal immigration, and we are working hard to remove this magnet,” Homan said. “ICE will continue its efforts to protect jobs for American workers by eliminating unfair competitive advantages for companies that exploit illegal immigration.”

Derek N. Benner, another top ICE official, warned that Wednesday's raids were “a harbinger of what's to come.”

“This is what we're gearing up for this year and what you're going to see more and more of is these large-scale compliance inspections, just for starters,” Benner, acting head of ICE's Homeland Security Investigations, told The Associated Press. “From there, we will look at whether these cases warrant an administrative posture or criminal investigation.”

Benner said they're not just targeting big companies. “It's going to be inclusive of everything that we see out there,” he said.

In its own statement, 7-Eleven said it was aware of the ICE raids and stressed that each franchise is run by “independent business owners” who are “solely responsible for their employees, including deciding who to hire and verifying their eligibility to work in the United States.”

“7-Eleven takes compliance with immigration laws seriously and has terminated the franchise agreements of franchisees convicted of violating these laws,” the statement read.

Trump ran on a promise to crack down and deport undocumented workers. And under him, ICE has reportedly made nearly 40 percent more arrests.

The raids on Wednesday grew out of a 2013 ICE investigation that resulted in charges against nine 7-Eleven franchisees and managers in New York and Virginia who allegedly used more than 25 stolen identities to employ over 100 people who were in the country illegally.

Eight of the accused wound up pleading guilty and were ordered to pay more than \$2.6 million in back wages. The ninth was arrested in November.



U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents serve an employment audit notice at a 7-Eleven convenience store on Jan. 10, 2018, in Los Angeles. Chris Carlson / AP
