

OUR OPINIONS: Punish those who profit from illegal information

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Body

Generally, Americans upset about **illegal** immigration focus their wrath on the desperate and destitute foreigners who come to this country seeking better lives for themselves and their families. Critics of lax immigration controls rarely home in on a more fitting target: the companies who knowingly hire undocumented workers.

But the case against Springdale, Ark.-based Tyson Foods Inc., one of the world's largest meat processing companies, might provide an occasion to look at the other side of the issue.

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In a 36-count indictment, the Justice Department accuses Tyson of "cultivating a corporate culture in which the hiring of **illegal** alien workers was condoned in order to meet production goals and cut costs to maximize **profits**."

Immigration officials say Tyson preferred **illegal** immigrants because they were forced to be more productive and were less likely to complain to management about their working conditions and lack of benefits. And in meat processing, that's reprehensible: It's one of the nation's riskiest industries, with one in four workers injured seriously enough to seek medical attention.

Tyson, two corporate executives (one a human resources manager, the other a division vice president) and four plant managers are accused of conspiring to smuggle **illegal** immigrants from Mexico to work at 15 Tyson plants in nine states. Those recruited were assisted in getting fraudulent documents, the indictment charges; the company is even accused of seeking out temporary employment agencies that lacked access to the Immigration and Naturalization Service's computer verification system.

Tyson's top echelon, by the way, is not even denying that the smuggling occurred. They are just claiming it was the work of a few renegade employees.

If the executives are convicted, they ought to be dealt with harshly. So harshly that no other company executives will ever consider anything like it.

And the Justice Department should not stop looking for evidence that the scam might have been approved at the highest levels of the company. If federal authorities can prove their case against Tyson, the company should be penalized to the fullest extent of the law. The usual slap on the wrist is not good enough.

To be fair, the INS has made it easy enough for companies to **profit** from **illegal** immigration. Lax and inconsistent enforcement encouraged businesses' blase attitude --- especially when the economy was soaring and companies

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faced labor shortages. As long as the agency opts to target the unsophisticated immigrant and overlook industry's accountability, illegal immigration will flourish.

When the paranoia of Sept. 11 fades, President Bush and Congress should return to the challenge of constructing a realistic immigration policy --- one that crafts a less convoluted legal process for immigrant workers and stems the flow of illegal immigrants with tougher penalties and border controls.

But until we get there, businesses must be taught there is zero tolerance for corporate megalomania. As Assistant Attorney General Michael Chertoff put it when he announced the Tyson indictment, "The bottom line on the corporate balance sheet is no excuse for criminal conduct."

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