

21 Immigrants Fired After Missing Work for Rally

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Body

At least **21** Mexican **immigrants** have been **fired** from their jobs at a meatpacking company in Detroit for **missing work** to attend an immigration rights march last month, advocates said Tuesday.

"This to me sends a very strong message that if you try to defend your rights, there are going to be sanctions against you," said Elena Herrada, one of several advocates trying to organize a meeting with officials of the company, Wolverine Packing, in an effort to get some of the workers rehired.

The **21** workers were **fired** on March 28, a day **after** they attended a **rally** that the police said drew more than 20,000 people. It was one of at least five marches and **rallies** in major cities that day.

The Detroit affiliate of the Spanish-language television network Univision reported the firings last week.

In a statement, the general manager of Wolverine Packing, Jay Bonahoom, said a "small number" of the more than 350 employees at three plants in the Detroit area had requested permission to attend the march and had been allowed to **miss work**. Employees had been notified orally and by letters posted in the plants that they would be **fired** if they **missed work** without authorization, the statement said.

"Many of these issues are near and dear to our hearts and can have serious effects on our lives, but Wolverine cannot allow these issues to stop our business," Mr. Bonahoom said. "When a large number of employees leave on a particular day, we cannot service our customers, and this puts all of our jobs in jeopardy."

One **fired** worker, Minerva Ramirez, 31, a native of Mexico who **worked** for Wolverine for almost six years, said she had told her supervisor that she planned to go to the march. But the day **after** the **rally**, Ms. Ramirez said, she was barred from entering the plant and was not allowed to speak in her defense.

Ms. Ramirez said she hoped to return to her job as a meatpacker, which paid \$10.35 an hour.

Edith Castillo, the executive director of Latin Americans for Social and Economic Development, a social services agency in Detroit, said she knew of a handful of employees at two other businesses who had been **fired after** attending the march.

"They were trying to exercise their right to protest, their right to have a voice," Ms. Castillo said. "I think we're going to see that this is just one incident of many civil rights violations that these workers have endured."

In Bellwood, Ill., 33 factory workers who had been **fired after** attending a **rally** in Chicago on March 10 were rehired when the Interfaith Workers' Rights Center intervened.

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Alberto M. Benitez, a law professor and director of the immigration clinic at George Washington University's law school in Washington, said employers were dependent on labor by illegal workers who had little, if any, recourse if they were **fired**.

"There are two or three potential employees available for every one of these poor folks who were **fired**," he said. "It's better for everyone if there is a lawful protected class of workers and not this shadowy underground army of workers that are here today, gone tomorrow."

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Graphic

Photo: Wolverine Packing in Detroit said employees were told to get permission before **missing work**. Minerva Ramirez was among those **fired**. (Photo by Fabrizio Costantini for The New York Times)

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