

Plant Faces Child Labor Charges

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Body

The owner and managers of the nation's largest kosher meatpacking plant were charged Tuesday with more than 9,000 misdemeanors alleging that they hired minors and in some cases had children younger than 16 handle dangerous equipment such as circular saws, meat grinders and power shears.

They are the first criminal charges against operators of the Agriprocessors plant in Postville, where nearly 400 illegal immigrants working at the facility were arrested in May in one of the largest single-site immigration raids in U.S. history.

The complaint filed by the Iowa attorney general's office said the violations involved 32 illegal immigrant children under 18, including seven who were younger than 16. Aside from handling dangerous equipment, the complaint also says that children were exposed to dangerous chemicals such as chlorine solutions and dry ice.

The attorney general's office said the violations occurred from Sept. 9, 2007, to May 12, 2008, when the plant was raided by federal immigration agents.

Charged are the company itself, plant owner Abraham Aaron Rubashkin, former plant manager Sholom Rubashkin, human resources manager Elizabeth Billmeyer, and Laura Althouse and Karina Freund, management employees in the company's human resources division.

Each defendant faces 9,311 individual counts -- one for each day a particular violation is alleged for each worker. Iowa Attorney General Tom Miller said at a news conference on Tuesday that he would not elaborate on what evidence led to the indictment.

"All of the named individual defendants possessed shared knowledge that Agriprocessors employed undocumented aliens. It was likewise shared knowledge among the defendants that many of those workers were minors," the affidavit said.

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The **charges** are simple misdemeanors, each carrying a maximum penalty of 30 days in jail and a fine of \$65 to \$625.

Chaim Abrams, a manager at the **plant**, said in a statement that Agriprocessors "vehemently denies" the allegations. He said the underage workers -- not the company -- are to blame.

"All of the minors at issue lied about their age in order to gain employment at the company," he said. "At the time of hiring, all of the minors, like all job applicants, presented and signed documents stating that they were over 18. They knew that, if they told the truth about their age, they would not be hired."

Abrams said the state wouldn't be able to back up its case.

Sonia Parras Konrad, an attorney representing more than 20 of the **children**, said her clients were as young as 14 when they started working at the **plant**.

She said minors in the **plant** were treated the same as adults and often worked in the same uncomfortable conditions.

Graphic

IMAGE; By Charlie Neibergall -- Associated Press; Iowa Attorney General Tom Miller, with **Labor** Commissioner Dave Neil, left, and Division of Criminal Investigation Director John Quinn, right, alleges that Agriprocessors meatpackers exposed **children** to danger.

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