

INS takes on illegals by mass firings

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Body

Tim Coultas expected the worst when two plainclothes federal agents came by the Adam's Mark Caribbean Gulf Resort in June to inspect employment records.

But Coultas, the general manager, had no idea how bad it would be.

The Immigration and Naturalization Service demanded the Clearwater Beach hotel fire 54 Hispanic employees for working in the country illegally.

It took two days and the help of a Spanish-speaking employee, but the 207-bed hotel sacked a third of its staff, mostly housekeepers and laundry washers.

"It was a shock," Coultas said. "We knew they (INS agents) had been to other hotels but we weren't expecting those kind of numbers. That's such a significant amount of staff. It made for a long summer, that's for sure."

INS

More than ever before, INS is cracking down on Tampa Bay area businesses that hire illegal immigrants by forcing them to fire slews of workers at a time.

Agents visit businesses to determine if employees used phony documents to get hired. Days later, they return with a list of workers to fire.

INS still raids businesses, arresting and deporting people. But in recent months it has used the added strategy of demanding mass firings as a less expensive way of targeting the area's mounting illegal immigrant population.

Deportation can take months, create a backlog in the courts and cost about \$ 50 a day to house arrested immigrants at detention facilities. And, authorities say, some deported people manage to sneak back to Florida a week or two later.

"If we arrest them and put them all in proceedings, that's a lot of money," said Jeff Wolder, supervisory agent of the investigative branch of the regional INS office in Tampa. "We just can't do it all."

But the INS strategy has its critics. They question leaving fired workers free to search for other jobs, using the same fake employment papers, which usually aren't confiscated because the workers don't carry them every day.

"These are generally good, hard-working people who wind up without jobs on the street," Clearwater police Chief Sid Klein said. "It's a repetitive cycle with no solution."

Just two weeks after INS visited the Adam's Mark, Coultas saw one of his fired employees working at a nearby restaurant.

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"They're just pushing (immigrants) from one business to another," said Ralph Emmanuelli, a Hispanic activist who lives in Palm Harbor. "They're just pushing them from one area to another. They just keep doing that. There is no solution to the problem."

Emmanuelli, a native of Puerto Rico, recently formed a political group to give Florida's Hispanics more of a voice.

In the past 12 months, agents at the INS's Tampa office have found about 500 people working illegally in 64 businesses in Central Florida, mostly in service and manufacturing jobs in Pinellas, Hillsborough and Sarasota counties.

At the Sheraton Sand Key hotel, more than 60 employees were fired after an INS visit. About 40 were fired at the Holiday Inn-Sunspree on Clearwater Beach. At the Mrs. Alison's Cookies plant in Plant City, another 40 were fired.

How frequently the mass firings occur depends on how quickly agents can build a case. "They might be out there every day for a week," Wolder said, "then they may go two weeks and not go out."

INS hopes the mass firings encourage immigrants to go back to their native countries, Wolder said. If they stay, the hope is that they are discouraged from getting another job.

The firings, he said, also send a message to businesses to be careful when examining an applicant's papers, which are easily obtained in the Tampa Bay area, according to INS and area immigration lawyers. A fake Social Security card or a phony Alien Registration Receipt card, commonly known as a green card, can be had for just a few hundred dollars.

Last week, at a gathering place for Hispanic immigrants in Clearwater, the Times found several people familiar with INS's crackdown. Speaking through an interpreter, they talked of their experiences, and of the danger of being caught.

Francia Cardona, 31, an illegal immigrant from Colombia fired from a manufacturing company last year, said she will not get another job until she is legal.

"It's too risky," she said. Cardona is a mother of three, who crossed into Texas in a canoe with her 7-month-old son when she was 17. When INS agents found her working at a Clearwater company last year, Cardona spent a tearful morning praying she would not have to go back to Colombia without her family. She now has hired a Clearwater lawyer to fight her deportation.

Laura Ruiz, who moved here legally from Peru with her family five years ago, said illegal immigrants searching for a job often apply for work at the Dunedin hotel where she manages the housekeeping staff.

"Everybody needs jobs, needs money," Ruiz said. "The people who are illegal need to be working. What should they do?"

Alejandro Gonzalez, 21, an illegal immigrant from Mexico, said he knows the INS is making rounds at businesses but says he is not concerned the INS eventually will find him. Gonzalez said he has not had a problem in his four years in the Tampa Bay area, working either in tomato fields or at construction sites.

INS estimates 350,000 illegal immigrants live in Florida - the fourth-highest in the nation - but does not know how many have jobs. In the bay area, most come from Mexico, El Salvador, Peru, Honduras and Guatemala.

INS says hundreds of tips about illegal workers pour into the agency's offices each week. Calls, faxes and e-mails come from employees, customers, competitors and neighbors of businesses suspected of hiring illegals. But INS, in the bay area and nationwide, has struggled to cope with the nation's fast-growing illegal immigrant population, which is now at 5-million.

In recent years, the federal government stepped in to help.

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The Clinton administration, with support from Congress, significantly increased the INS budget to compensate for years of inadequate funding. In the past five years, money set aside annually for enforcement rose from \$ 933-million to \$ 2.6-billion.

Wolder said the increase has allowed INS offices across the nation to hire more agents. The regional office in Tampa, responsible for 10 west-central Florida counties, hired two extra agents to investigate workers at businesses.

INS most often finds illegal immigrants in areas where there are strong tourism industries, such as the Pinellas beaches and Tampa's Westshore area.

Agents focus on hotels, restaurants, factories, commercial laundries, and construction and landscaping companies. But Wolder said INS does not usually fine businesses unless they knowingly hire illegal immigrants or do not have accurate records.

Mass firings may seem strange, but some immigration lawyers say they serve a purpose.

William Flynn, a Tampa immigration lawyer, said the tactic is effective because it targets businesses, not individual workers. It can cripple a business, especially in times of low unemployment when businesses have trouble finding workers for low-paying jobs.

For example, Mrs. Alison's Cookies in Plant City was not able to replace its workers quickly enough and had to cut back production when 40 of its 300 employees were fired.

John Cudd, plant manager, said it took several months to fill the vacancies. "It was tough," he said. "As an employer, you think you have the right documentation, but you just don't know."

While mass firings are becoming more common, INS continues to try to deport immigrants arrested in raids on businesses.

Last August, agents arrested 26 workers on assembly lines at Instrument Transformers in Clearwater. In December, 52 workers were arrested at National Linen Service in Sarasota. In January, 22 workers were arrested at Luke Brothers lawn service company in New Port Richey.

Some employees were deported. Others fighting deportation are still waiting for a court date.

At the Friendly Fisherman restaurant in Madeira Beach, agents arrested 17 kitchen workers in March as they prepared for the lunch rush.

"We were completely taken off guard," said Kathleen McDole, the restaurant's general manager. "We were so shocked. We thought we were in the right. We thought we had the forms. It was terrible. We almost had to close the business."

The 20-year-old restaurant lost its entire kitchen staff, from cooks to dishwashers, so suddenly that food was left cooking on the stove.

McDole scrambled to find people to help run the restaurant: Her brother helped cook, other managers washed dishes, even her children pitched in.

It took the tourist spot at John's Pass almost five months to recover from what employees still call "Bloody Thursday."

"We just barely made it through," McDole said. "It's just another thing that makes it hard to do business."

- Times staff writer Ana Valle and researchers John Martin and Carolyn Hardnett contributed to this report.

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