

# 1,200 janitors fired in 'quiet' immigration raid

by [Sasha Aslanian](#), Minnesota Public Radio  
November 9, 2009

Minneapolis — One of the largest immigration crackdowns under the Obama administration to date took place in the Twin Cities last month, when 1,200 undocumented janitors were fired from their jobs, according to immigration lawyers.

The janitors worked for [ABM](#), a San Francisco-based contract company that cleans many downtown office towers in the Twin Cities.

The Obama administration has shifted away from the dramatic workplace raids that were a hallmark of the Bush administration's enforcement strategy. Under President Obama, the Department of Homeland Security says it is putting pressure on employers who break the law.

One of the fired janitors has agreed to talk with MPR News about his situation. MPR has agreed not to use his name because he is undocumented and at risk of deportation. He has three U.S. born children, and a wife who is also undocumented.

His story begins in 1992, when he entered the country illegally from Mexico. He and his wife lived in New York and Chicago. He worked in car washes, restaurants, a McDonald's, and as a cleaner before coming to Minneapolis in 2001. He landed a job with ABM.



[Fired janitor](#)

"We cleaned the whole buildings, from bathrooms to kitchens, carpeting, offices," he said. "On the outsides we cleaned glass, whole floors at a time depending on the time we were given."

This janitor says he cleaned for the Plymouth Building in downtown Minneapolis. He says it was hard work, but the pay was good. He made nearly \$13 an hour.

Then, in June, his supervisor handed him a letter.

"Letter said we had to bring in documents, our Social Security cards, green cards, state ID, or be immediately fired," he said.

The letter on ABM letterhead, obtained by MPR, informed the workers that Immigrations and Customs Enforcement, or ICE, had found problems with their paperwork.

The nonprofit [Immigrant Law Center of Minnesota](#) was called in by the janitors' union, [SEIU](#), to give legal advice to the frightened employees.



[ABM letter](#)

"There was a lot of fear that even showing up to talk about your documents that you were going to be arrested and detained by ICE," said the center's John Keller. "People thinking that they shouldn't go to work, extremely concerned about their children. Almost always the first concerns in these circumstances -- even when your children are US born -- is, what if I go to work and don't come back?"

"We have spent a lot of time working with people in these circumstances, and it is sometimes some of the best work we do -- just to inform people what is real, what is rumor," said Keller.

The most important rumor to dispel was that the workers were arrested. Unlike raids at the Swift meatpacking plant in Worthington in 2006, and the Postville, Iowa raid in 2008, the ABM janitors would not be rounded up or arrested.

The union worked with the company and ICE to give employees more time to show proper documents. They had until October. Then, each Monday, another batch of workers who failed to show correct papers was fired.

ABM won't reveal the total size of its Twin Cities workforce, or any information at all, but the scope seems large. This janitor says of the 120 workers who cleaned at the Plymouth building, only three were able to stay on the job.



[Legal resident](#)

Another janitor we spoke with is a legal resident who's still on the job, cleaning bathrooms at the Ameriprise building. She estimates 80 percent of her co-workers were let go.

ABM is a Fortune 1000 company traded on the New York Stock Exchange. Its headquarters is in San Francisco, and according to its Web site, it employs more than 100,000 people. In 2008, its revenues were \$3.6 billion.

ABM would not make staff at the Minneapolis office or the corporate headquarters available for an interview. Tony Mitchell, ABM Industries vice president of corporate communications in New York, issued this two line statement via e-mail.

"Federal law prescribes specific procedures by which employers conduct employment verification activities. Our policy is full compliance with the law," Mitchell said.

The janitors' union, SEIU, is prohibited from talking about the enforcement action. The ABM janitor jobs make up one-quarter of SEIU's membership.



[John Keller](#)

Immigrations and Customs Enforcement also won't comment. Tim Counts, spokesman for the Bloomington Office, wrote via e-mail: "For operational security reasons, we don't discuss ongoing enforcement activity, including confirming or denying that we are looking at a particular person or entity."

Counts says ABM has not been fined.

"It's a sticky legal issue of, 'What did you know and when did you know it?'" said Counts.

Mark Cangemi is a retired ICE official. He used to do these kinds of workplace investigations and he's practiced immigration law.

Cangemi can't talk about this specific case or the employer involved, but Cangemi says the patterns in these workplace investigations are always the same.

"Could be a record-keeping error, civil or criminal in nature. We just don't know," he said.

Cangemi wrapped up his work with ICE in 2006. His last month on the job included the Swift meatpacking raids, including the one in Worthington. Cangemi says that style of

enforcement is incredibly expensive, but the point is the same -- to bring employers into compliance with the law.

ABM has been a silent raid. But the number of workers involved is almost as large as all those arrested in the six Swift raids. And it's three times bigger than Postville.

Cangemi wonders how effective this enforcement will be, considering the workers are free to move into other jobs.

"Why give people an opportunity to leave the employment without taking any action against them as individuals?" said Cangemi. "Put them into proceedings. Let them argue their case. If they have a case that allows them to remain in the United States under the law, so be it. If they don't, then the law stands to be enforced."

The Obama administration has been aggressive in removing undocumented workers. In fiscal year 2009, which ended in September, ICE deported 6,300 people from the region represented by Minnesota, the Dakotas, Iowa and Nebraska. That's 1,000 more people than during the last year of the Bush administration.

As for the upheaval at ABM in the Twin Cities, the 1,200 jobs held by the janitors have apparently been filled.

The company posted job openings in late September, 10 days before the first 300 workers were fired. A message on its answering machine says in English and in Spanish that ABM is no longer hiring.

The janitor who spoke with MPR says he's found another job. He calls himself one of the lucky ones. He's got a driver's license, and a connection that led to another job cleaning houses for a smaller company. It's part time, pays less money, and gets no breaks. And he's still paying taxes.

The tougher immigration enforcement has prompted three of the janitor's four siblings to return to Mexico, taking their U.S. citizen children with them. But as crushed as he was to lose his janitor's job, he says he still won't return to Mexico.

The janitor says he's still afraid ICE agents could round him up because they have all his data from ABM. And he's frantic to find more work.

"I really want people to hear -- and if possible even get to the ears of President Barack Obama -- that we don't come here for anything other than to work" said the janitor. "And if anyone could see the places we come from and were in our shoes, they would do the same thing."

John Keller of the Immigrant Law Center says of the 1,200 fired janitors, about 10 might have a path to citizenship under existing laws. The rest, he says, will probably try to wait it out, hoping for the laws to change so they can work here legally.