

# Lockdown in Greeley

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*Greeley, Colorado*

On the northern edge of this frozen-over city of 90,000 halfway between Denver and Cheyenne, Swift & Co.'s beef processing plant squats like a windowless concrete bunker alongside the snow-covered railroad tracks. The winter air hangs heavy with the stench of animal waste. And the three strings of barbed wire atop the chain-link fence that girdles the facility give the hulking complex all the appeal of some forsaken, remote prison. Nevertheless, the steam snaking high and gently from the plant's smokestacks has for several decades served as a beacon of hope and promise for thousands of immigrants, mostly Mexican, who have come north looking for a better life.

Working on the meatpacking floor can be a grueling, monotonous, dangerous routine, making thousands of the same cuts or swipes every day, and annual injury and illness rates might run 25 percent or more, but a union job with a wage of \$12-\$13 an hour, enough to support a family, seems worth the pain and risk.

At least until December 12, the holiday celebrating the appearance of the Virgin of Guadalupe. What materialized in front of the Swift gates that morning was more like a vision of hell. Shortly after 7 am a half-dozen buses rolled up with a small fleet of government vans, which unloaded dozens of heavily armed federal agents backed by riot-clad local police. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents sealed off all entrances and exits and formed a perimeter around the factory. Then others barged inside and started rounding up the whole workforce.

Some of the frightened workers jumped into cattle pens; others hid behind machinery or in closets. Those who tried to run were wrestled to the ground. Sworn statements by some workers allege that the ICE agents used chemical sprays to subdue those who didn't understand the orders barked at them in English. The plant's entire workforce was herded into the cafeteria and separated into two groups: those who claimed to be US citizens or legal residents and those who didn't.

While the Greeley plant was being locked down, more than 1,000 ICE agents simultaneously raided five other Swift factories in Texas, Iowa, Nebraska, Utah and Minnesota. By the end of the day, nearly 1,300 immigrant workers had been taken into custody--about 265 of them from Greeley. Department of Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff boasted that the combined raids amounted to the largest workplace enforcement action in history. ICE Assistant Secretary Julie Myers would later claim that Operation Wagon Train, as the raids were dubbed, dealt a major blow in the "war against illegal immigration."

Now critics of the raids--workers, union reps, clergy, community leaders, policy analysts and lawyers--wonder what the high-profile sweep accomplished other than to traumatize a few hundred Latino families and to cost Swift an estimated \$30 million in lost production. If anything, it starkly reveals, once again, a federal immigration policy completely detached from economic and social realities and a Bush White House incapable of moving ahead with much-

promised reform. "What has changed because of all this?" rhetorically asks Francisco Granados, a Greeley businessman and volunteer providing relief services to the affected families. "Nothing. *Nada*. The whole system is set up to make you lie."

There was one new twist in the December 12 action that distinguished it from earlier headline-making sweeps. Homeland Security and ICE claimed the raids were triggered by a federal probe into identity-theft rings. Eventually, about 240 workers were hit with criminal charges, mostly involving the use of a false or stolen Social Security number. But that meant the other thousand or so detained workers were held only on immigration violations, undermining the identity-theft rationale for the roundup.

"By saying these raids were about identity theft, ICE and the Bush Administration suddenly changed the rules of the game," says Mark Grey, director of the Iowa Center for Immigrant Leadership and Integration. By highlighting the identity-theft angle, DHS officials have cast into a sinister light a common practice, at worst a victimless crime. The undocumented workers caught up in the sweep weren't using other identities to run up someone's credit card bill or push someone into financial ruin but to collect their own paychecks, since they had used others' Social Security numbers to get on payroll. Says Grey: "The game until now has been an elaborate choreography among the employers who need the immigrant workers, the immigrants who want these jobs, the communities who need them, the cattlemen who depend on them and the government whose basic motto has been: Don't ask, don't tell."

Swift, whose headquarters are here in Greeley, tried unsuccessfully to head off the raids after company records were subpoenaed by ICE last spring. In early December company lawyers were denied a court injunction against the raids. For the past decade, Swift has used the government's Basic Pilot program, which supposedly verifies the validity of each new employee's Social Security number. But the program doesn't catch a number used by multiple individuals. Swift, then, played "the game" and so was ready, on the day of the raid, to issue a statement saying the arrests "violate the agreements" with the government "and raise serious questions as to the government's possible violation of individual workers' civil rights."

What nobody, including ICE, can answer is why, if the real targets were those people with stolen Social Security numbers, federal officials didn't go quietly into the Swift factories and, armed with warrants, simply arrest the suspects. Why the brash paramilitary operation? "I'll tell you why," says an indignant Robert McCormick, a Greeley immigration attorney representing about sixteen of the workers. "This is indeed a declaration of war on the immigrant community. This is about Republicans trying to appease their core bloc of supporters. Yeah, some people got a big kick out of this. But I think most Americans were revolted by it. Here in town, a lot of people have said they want no part of it. And others, I assure you, are going to wind up being very ashamed of it."

When I arrive in Greeley about three weeks after the raids, the entire town seems engulfed by cross-cutting emotions of bewilderment, fear, anger and resolve. United Food and Commercial Workers Local 7, the union that represents the Greeley workers and called the level of the force "totally outrageous," has been struggling to provide minimal legal and humanitarian assistance for those detained and the families left behind. "We still don't know where everybody is. There's still people popping up here and there in different detention centers," says burly Fernando Rodriguez, a director of Local 7, during an interview in his small downtown office. "Things are still chaotic."

Spurred by a lawsuit brought by Rodriguez's union, Denver Federal Judge John Kane found that a month after the raids, ICE had yet to disclose a comprehensive list of exactly who had been detained and where they were being held--or whether they had already been summarily deported. On January 12 he ordered ICE to disclose the whereabouts of all 262 Greeley detainees within ten days. "There are people in custody--there is an urgency to this," an angry Judge Kane told ICE lawyers. ICE finally complied with the court order in late January.

The aggressiveness of the arrests and what followed have startled many. "I was amazed by the force used, by the heavy armament," says Democratic State Representative James Riesberg. "Amazed that so many didn't have the bond hearings they were owed, that so many were held without their location disclosed."

When news of the raids broke, Rodriguez entered the plant but ICE officials prohibited him from getting personal information from the workers to pass on to their families. "ICE treated the workers like animals," he says. "Didn't let people eat or drink anything. Didn't let them go to the bathroom. Wouldn't let workers use phones to make arrangements for kids in school or at home." He adds, "This was something you think you might see on TV, but never did I imagine I would actually live through it."

The Greeley Latino community, about 35 percent of the population, was not totally unprepared for the disaster. Political events of the previous year had spurred community organization and generated vibrant new leadership. As word of the raid flashed on local Spanish-language radio, hundreds of worried family members and protesters converged on the factory gates. Local police mobilized to keep the crowd at bay as their loved ones were handcuffed and loaded by ICE into waiting buses. The militarized sweep hit the community like a hurricane, says 33-year-old Sylvia Martinez, one of Greeley's most prominent new Latino activists. "It's frightening to see the power that the federal government has to blow through here and leave a shambles," she says as we eat lunch at one of the town's many Mexican restaurants. "This has been our Katrina, a man-made Katrina. There's no information, no accountability."

As I speak with Martinez, we're joined by a number of relief volunteers, all of whom express something between red-hot anger and sullen resignation over the way, as they see it, they were abandoned by the government. As ICE carted away hundreds of workers, no federal or local official stayed behind to respond to questions, offer any information or deal with shattered families. "Just this morning I was with a 16-year-old Guatemalan boy who came here two months ago with his mother. Now she's been taken away and is detained in Texas," says volunteer Laura Zuniga. "He doesn't speak English, he barely speaks Spanish, and he's been living with people who share his apartment. He's in shock. And there's no one, really no one, in charge."

Swift donated \$60,000 to the local United Way. But local activists say too much of the charity money is tied up in red tape. They also cite a lack of solidarity with the detained workers and their families. The local union, they say, hasn't been easy to deal with, and the national labor movement has shown little support.

"The Swift raids are a troubling example of the way enforcement is being increased," says Ana Avendaño, associate general counsel of the AFL-CIO's immigrant worker program. "But, no, we didn't put out any statement on the raids, because [the food workers' union] didn't ask us for anything." That union has affiliated with the new Change to Win coalition--a breakaway from the AFL-CIO--and while both federations support comprehensive immigration reform they have

not agreed on a common strategy. "We did feel we were left out there by ourselves in the first couple days," says a national official of the food workers' union. "But then the hotel workers and Change to Win came in with a strong statement of support."

Elected Democratic officials--who now hold the Colorado Statehouse and a majority in the legislature--have not offered much significant support. "In Colorado," says Sylvia Martinez, "the politicians think it would be political suicide to support these workers." Just last summer, in a special session of the legislature, state Democrats tried to one-up then-GOP Governor Bill Owens in passing a slate of tough anti-immigrant legislation. "Our Democrats have been as unhelpful as the Republicans on the immigration issues," says Lindsey Hodel, field director for the Colorado Progressive Coalition. State Representative Riesberg, who convened a community forum on the Greeley raids in late January and who supports liberalized immigration reform, readily concedes that the prevailing political atmosphere makes it hard for Democrats to speak out. "The people of Colorado have made it clear they want the law to be enforced and are saying, 'What part of illegal don't you understand?'" he says. "But I'm concerned that some of those feelings are based on disinformation."

The vacuum left by elected officials has been filled by new grassroots groups like Martinez's Latinos Unidos and their most reliable ally, Father Bernie Schmitz of Our Lady of Peace church. The 59-year-old bespectacled priest has stepped forward as an ardent advocate and defender of the immigrant workers who make up the bulk of his congregation. His church and its social network have become the command center of community relief and have so far raised more than \$80,000 in contributions. Family members left behind by the raids can turn to the union and Padre Bernie, as he's called, to pay the utility bills. A food center funded by donations made through the church provides boxes of food for anyone who walks in the door.

On the one-month anniversary of the raids, Father Schmitz organized an interfaith mass that drew dozens on a bitterly cold, snowy weeknight. "Let us pray for the migrant workers," he told those who attended. "Let us who benefit from their labor be grateful to them for what they provide and let us welcome them." In an interview after the mass, Father Schmitz confirms that while his church has been coordinating relief and tending to divided families, he has yet to be contacted by any official from ICE or any other federal agency. "Not that I'd necessarily want to speak to them," he says with a smile.

At a cake and punch reception that evening in the church basement, I meet two middle-aged brothers from Guatemala's western countryside. They speak to me in a Spanish heavily accented with their indigenous Quiché. Another brother and the 22-year-old son of one of them were caught in the raid and now languish with sixty other Guatemalans in an El Paso detention center. Judge Kane ordered them returned to Colorado so they can be assisted by counsel and allowed to post bond, but instead they were held for weeks out of state. "We can't go back to Totonicapán," says Rosalio, referring to the Guatemalan department a lot of them come from. He's been working in Colorado for ten years but has no legal papers. "Back there it's full of organized crime, drug traffickers and injustice." He goes on, "And injustice here as well. It's been very difficult seeing our families taken away from work for no other crime than working." No one I speak to in Greeley--not Father Schmitz, not Sylvia Martinez, not even the Guatemalans themselves--can tell me of any local Guatemalan leaders, any activists or representatives. All anybody knows is that there are several hundred Guatemalans in town and now dozens of them in jail.

Greeley was founded in 1870 as an experimental farming community organized by Nathan Meeker, the agricultural editor of Horace Greeley's *New York Tribune*. By the 1920s the almost uniformly WASP community had grown the area into one of America's most important sugar beet providers. During World War II, German and Austrian POWs housed nearby were used to help tend to the profitable crops. Mexican braceros were also imported to take the place of local men drafted into the war. Cattle processing on a mass scale had come to town by the 1960s. And as the meatpacking industry went through its own labor revolution in the 1980s and '90s--breaking some traditional unions, automating and downgrading much of the workforce to less-skilled, lower-paid positions--the local plant became a magnet for Mexican and Central American migrants.

Like many other mountain and Midwestern cities experiencing similar "browning," Greeley was until recently making an uneasy cultural transition. The more middle-class Anglos, some commuting to Denver to high-tech jobs, live on the manicured west side of town. The newer, darker immigrant population has mushroomed in the grittier eastern and northern neighborhoods. Jerry's Market, founded by German immigrants, soon added a *taquería*, while *carnicerías* and *tortillerías* appeared on the edge of downtown. The *Greeley Tribune* started publishing a weekly supplement in Spanish. Latinos still had no political representation, but racial conflict was submerged.

Greeley and surrounding Weld County, however, have the misfortune of being a GOP stronghold in an increasingly Democratic state, and thus are vulnerable to hardball partisan manipulation. In the fall of 2005 the politically ambitious county DA, Ken Buck (a Republican married to the current state GOP vice chair), joined forces with Republican US Senator Wayne Allard and conservative US Representative Marilyn Musgrave in proposing that ICE open a local office in Greeley. The trio saw political opportunity in linking illegal immigration to rising crime rates and argued that bringing the immigration cops into Greeley would restore order. The tone for such racially tinged politicking had already been established by fellow Colorado US Representative Tom Tancredo, who built his political profile (and now intends to run for President) on a hard-line anti-immigration position.

"Before the raids, I think we were all trying to move toward some sort of adjustment," says Sylvia Martinez. "But that all changed when Ken Buck made his move." The county commission, without public debate, approved Buck's proposal for a local ICE office. As the measure moved forward, the Latino community began to stir. Longtime Chicano activists and 1960s veterans Priscilla Falcon and Ricardo Romero put together some protest meetings, which soon swelled in size, frequency and intensity. New leaders, including Martinez, emerged.

The Montana-born daughter of Tex-Mex farmworkers, Martinez had worked the fields in her youth and worked her way up to serving as an investigator for the local public defender. While she followed local politics, she didn't get involved until Buck's proposal for the ICE office. "I thought I would be a coward if I didn't stand up against it," she says. As many as 600 people opposed the proposal when it came before the City Council in late 2005. The council punted, and it was scrapped. Local Latino power had won its first victory.

Once again, as the response to the December raids continues to build, that same sort of rising political energy is being felt. "All this stuff has made one great change," says Mexican-born radio announcer Elda Gamez, who became the community's electronic voice as she went live on the air during the day of the raid. "That change is unity. We were hit with a very low blow, but it

served us well, and we've gotten support from people we've never heard from before." Father Schmitz is equally optimistic. "This has put a face on the issue," he says. "It's no longer abstract."

What drives that optimism, even in the midst of the current turmoil, is a sense of inevitability. The local migrants, their families and advocates know they are riding the tide of a global economic and demographic wave more powerful than any fleeting enforcement or political gesture. "ICE might think it has changed the rules, but the real game here is supply and demand," says Mark Grey. "This industry and several others would collapse if you removed the immigrant workers. There is simply no going back. The only solution is comprehensive immigration reform which recognizes these realities."

The Clinton Administration carried out similar immigration raids on the meatpacking industry between 1992 and 1997. But that didn't put a crimp in the northward flow of migrants. For millions of Mexicans, the march across the border is a forced exodus, as a couple from Guanajuato tell me when I sit with them in their cramped, drafty trailer in a mobile home park in Greeley. I'll call them Domingo and Emilia; both are in their early 30s. Domingo, an undocumented Swift worker since 2001, was picked up in the December raid, briefly jailed in El Paso and then dumped across the border into Juárez. After a quick trip to see his extended family in Guanajuato, he put together \$2,000, paid a coyote and, along with seven other deported Swift workers from his hometown, dodged the Border Patrol and trudged across the Arizona desert back into the United States. He arrived in his Greeley trailer exactly twenty-two days after he'd been arrested.

"I walked for three days and three nights. I was already diabetic, but now I think my leg is ruined," he says, massaging his shin. "But I would do it again tomorrow. And tomorrow and the next day," he says, nodding toward his 3-year-old son, who's running on the threadbare rug in Spiderman pajamas. The boy is a US citizen, as is his 1-year-old sister. Their 8-year-old sister, poring over her homework at the tiny dining table, is not.

Domingo says that from the moment he was detained, he was determined to come back. He knows he can't return to Swift, where he made \$12.75 an hour, but he also knows he can't take his family back to Mexico. "There is no work there," he says. The union paid the couple's gas and light bill and gave Emilia a food card worth \$50. But no more aid is available, and the family is five days late on the \$389 monthly trailer rent. Emilia says the only option to be discarded is returning to Mexico. "This country may not be our country, but it is the country of opportunity," she says, hugging her husband. "This isn't for us. We are Mexicans. This is for them. The children. They are the Americans."