

Daily Globe

Union decries action

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WORTHINGTON — Representatives from the United Food and Commercial Workers International Union (UFCW) and local church leaders met Wednesday for a press conference to speak about the Department of Homeland Security Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) enforcement investigation that took place at the six Swift and Co. meatpacking plants, including the Worthington facility.

“I’m standing here in protest of the raid that took place at Swift yesterday,” said Local Union 1161 — UFCW President Mike Potter. “It was so overwhelming. I’ve never experienced anything like this in my life.”

Potter said his main concern was the “aftermath of the raid” and the children and families who were affected.

Susana De Leon and Bruce Nestor, Minneapolis immigration attorneys, were on hand to make statements and answer questions.

“The raids that were carried out in Worthington and across the U.S. were fundamental human rights violations of people that work and are members of our community,” Nestor said. “What the raids really represent is the failure of our government and elected leaders to pass comprehensive immigration reform.”

Nestor said he considers Tuesday’s actions a targeting of the immigrant population.

“What happened yesterday is that the plant was swept for members of this community — for mothers and fathers, for members of churches, for workers and the people who are performing tasks required to keep our economy working,” he added.

De Leon called the enforcement a “blatant violation of human rights of citizens of this nation and others, and basically of this community.”

She said “blue-eyed, blonde-haired people” were basically told to go ahead, while anyone with “brown” skin was detained and questioned. The job ahead, she believes, is to work with the community to locate missing people and establish communication with immigration officials to continue the work of freeing those arrested.

Local churches were represented by the Revs. Larry Brixius, Mike Zaske and Richard Ricker and Sister Karen Thein and others.

Thein, who said she works closely with the Latino community, said many people came to the church or called to find out what was happening.

“Part of what happens is fear, which isolates and disconnects,” she said. “Worthington has tried to create a family and community. When this happens, we break down the trust, and fear sets in.”

She described the Latino community as afraid, saying many were too scared to leave their homes or to talk.

“This only causes people to become more untrusting,” she added.

All of the church representatives encouraged community members to become involved in helping those in need and said the churches would be available to assist people as much as possible.

Brixius likened Tuesday’s events to terrorism and said it would take time for the community to heal and to reassemble what has been broken.

“This moment is traumatic for a lot of people,” he added.

“I’m ashamed to live in a country where this kind of thing happens,” Ricker said, “where laws are enforced with a club instead of with intelligence and forethought.”

Ricker added that he couldn’t believe ICE, with all its years of experience, couldn’t take more steps to ensure children were not sent to empty homes. De Leon also commented about ICE not taking steps to make the schools aware of what was happening.

According to comments made Tuesday by Worthington Public Safety Director Mike Cumiskey, schools were informed of the enforcement action at Swift by local law enforcement early that day.

Jesus Alcantar, a Swift employee and union representative, said through an interpreter that he had found four children knocking on doors looking for their mother.

“I took them by the hand and started knocking on doors, looking for family members who would take them in,” he said. “I saw a little girl on the street. I saw someone take her, but I don’t know who that was.”

Alcantar said if anyone knows of children still misplaced to take them to churches, so they can be placed or “paired up” with their families.

There were no concrete numbers about how many children were displaced, but De Leon said one child is too many.

There is no word on how long it will take ICE to process all the men and women who were arrested.