

# ICE raids are union busting

written by Sharon Black

August 17, 2019



'Mississippi Goddam'

## Workers' rights under attack

*The writer is a former UFCW food processing plant worker.*

Aug. 8 — While the El Paso, Texas, community was still in mourning, deeply shaken and suffering from the racist mass murder, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) launched the largest single-state raid in U.S. history in Mississippi on seven poultry processing plants. Six hundred and eighty workers were rounded up and arrested.

This raid was timed to come on the first day of the school year, so that many children had to walk home, only to find their loved ones, their mothers and fathers, missing. If anyone has any question of whether or not this is an act of war and terror, listen to the [CNN news video](#) or [the aftermath](#).

What is key for all workers to understand is that this raid was calculated payback for workers organizing, and it was aimed at the heart of the movement to unionize the South, which has historically been a cheap source of labor.

Two of the chicken processing plants operated by Koch Foods are organized by United Food and Commercial Workers Union. This same company recently paid out a \$3.75 million settlement as a result of a class action suit that charged Koch Foods with sexual harassment, discrimination based on national origin and race, and retaliation against Latinx workers.

The lawsuit, filed by workers at the Morton plant, said that supervisors touched and/or made sexually suggestive comments to Latinx women workers, hit workers and charged money for normal everyday work activities.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration charged Koch Foods \$88,000 in penalties for safety violations that resulted in severe injuries at the Mississippi plant.

Koch Foods also exploited Black farmers in Mississippi. See the ProPublica article: [The shadow of slavery, sharecropping and Jim Crow has left black farmers in an especially precarious position.](#)

Peco Foods is another company that runs five Mississippi plants. Three — in Canton, Bay Springs and Sebastopol — were targeted by ICE agents.

Workers at the Peco Foods Sebastopol and Canton plants had filed safety complaints, which resulted in OSHA penalties. Peco settled a \$9,550 penalty in 2015 and then was investigated five more times. Workers suffered amputations and fractures.

Peco was also charged with violating the Fair Labor Standards Act by requiring workers to perform “off the clock” work and denying overtime.

It took unbelievable courage for workers to stand up to these brutal conditions and the ICE raid was aimed at breaking their will and determination.

UFCW spokesperson Abraham White said: “Workers across this country are too scared to stand up for their rights and to report wage theft, dangerous work conditions, and other workplace issues. We must act now to end this dangerous climate of fear.”

Meatpacking still remains one of the most dangerous jobs, which has gotten worse with speedups introduced through increased automation. It’s hard to describe the work environment to anyone who has never worked inside a food processing plant. Temperatures are cold or freezing depending on what is being produced; water and animal fat frequently make floors slippery and dangerous. Workers risk amputations and machine related injuries that leave lifetime scars.

Koch Foods hires about 13,000 workers in Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Illinois, Ohio and Tennessee. The company headquarters is in Park Ridge, Ill. It supplies chicken to Walmart, Burger King, Kroger and Aldi markets.

[According to the Jackson, Miss., Free Press](#): “Executives at PECO Foods and Koch Foods have donated at least \$170,000 to the National Chicken Council Political

Action Committee, or NCCC, which in turn gives money mostly to Republican politicians. In 2018, the NCCC gave \$190,000 to U.S. House Republicans, and just \$23,000 to House Democrats.”

To date, there have been no reports of penalties against these companies. Forbes lists the owner of Koch Foods, Joseph C. Grendy, as being worth \$3.3 billion.

