

# Illegal Immigrant-Hirer Now Faces Discrimination Lawsuit

Holbrook Mohr, Associated Press

JACKSON, Miss. (AP) — A Mississippi company that pleaded guilty to conspiracy related to the nation's largest workplace raid on illegal immigrants is now facing a lawsuit accusing it of discriminating against non-immigrants who applied for jobs.

A discrimination lawsuit filed Friday in U.S. District Court on behalf of four black women claims the company gave preferential treatment to Latino applicants and workers, many of whom were illegal immigrants from Mexico. The lawsuit, which represents only one side of a legal argument, seeks class-action status.

Immigration agents detained nearly 600 illegal immigrants at Howard Industries' electrical transformer plant in Laurel in 2008. It was the largest such raid in U.S. history. The company pleaded guilty last week to conspiracy to violate immigration laws and was fined \$2.5 million.

A woman who answered the phone Monday at Howard Industries declined to give her name and said the company had no comment on the lawsuit.

The lawsuit claims that one of the plaintiffs, Charlyn Dozier, applied for a job with Howard Industries every three to six months beginning in 2002, but wasn't offered a position until after the 2008 raid.

The other plaintiffs make similar allegations.

Their attorney, Lisa M. Ross, said there's more to the case than just preferring illegal immigrants. She thinks the company was acting on racial stereotypes that Latinos work harder than blacks and whites and would put up with conditions that American workers may find objectionable.

"As a result of bringing in undocumented Latino workers, they were discriminating against blacks and whites," she said.

The lawsuit claims Howard Industries not only knew it was hiring illegal immigrants, but instructed some on how to get false identities and concealed the fact that hundreds of employees were illegal immigrants.

In the days after the raid, hundreds of people lined up outside the plant to apply for jobs. Jobs at Howard Industries were among the most coveted in the area, which is in Mississippi's Pine Belt region and is home to a commercial timber industry and chicken processing plants. Howard Industries makes dozens of products from electrical transformers to medical supplies. It had been considered one of Mississippi's most successful private companies.

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Howard Industries has repeatedly denied knowing that illegal immigrants worked at the sprawling plant, and blamed the situation on its former personnel director, Jose Humberto Gonzalez. Gonzalez was the only company executive charged in the case and pleaded guilty in December 2009. His sentencing is scheduled for Thursday in federal court in Hattiesburg.

In a lengthy statement after pleading guilty last week, Howard Industries said the illegal immigrants used fake papers to circumvent numerous identification checks the company uses. But prosecutors said the company knowingly hired illegal immigrants.

Some of the workers were given jobs even after the Social Security Administration told the company that their Social Security numbers were not valid, prosecutors said. The same allegation is made in the civil lawsuit.

Gonzalez admitted to similar allegations when he pleaded guilty.

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