

MI PUEBLO, LATINO FOOD CHAIN, CAUGHT IN ETHICAL DILEMMA: MORALLY IT WANTS TO HELP ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS, LEGALLY IT CANNOT



Around 20 years ago, Mi Pueblo Food Center commenced, unassumingly, as a small butcher shop run by an illegal immigrant. It catered mainly to the local Latino population. From its humble beginnings it has now grown to a chain of 21 stores across California, but is still dependent on its Latino clientele and is one of the leading providers of employment to Latino workers. However, its success has brought it under public scrutiny and under the federal immigration authorities' scanner. If that was not enough worker unions want to organize and represent the companies 3000 plus workers, leading to frequent clashes and a consumer boycott. The company's consumer base and workforce is almost exclusively Latino and its owners fear that intrusion by unions or federal regulatory bodies could intrude upon its ethnic traditions and render asunder its carefully tended indigenous fabric. A current immigration audit is insisting that it implement a debatable federal program, E-Verify, to ensure that those new employees that they employ at their workplace have the legal sanction to work in the United States. Perla Rodriguez, spokeswoman for the company said that this decision would impact them in ways that other company's would find hard to comprehend because theirs was a company that was not only created by an immigrant but was also dependent on immigrants for its very existence and survival. Moreover, she said, that the company did not deliberately employ any undocumented immigrants. The San Jose-based United Food and Commercial Workers Local 5, which represents the Mi Pueblo employees all around the state, said the company's consent to E-Verify it employees, was acquiescing to the demands of US Customs and Immigration Enforcement Department and digressing from its accepted immigrant-friendly stance. Moreover, the unions say that the company is also in violation of wage and overtime pay. It has asked the ICE to immediately stop their audit and have asked people not to patronize Mi Pueblo till the company stops using the E-Verify program. The federal government, without adequate manpower to conduct immigration raids, is increasingly relying on workplace audits to trace illegal workers. These raids have been termed as the "silent raids" and their number has increased from a mere 254 five years ago to 2,734 this year. Illegal workers exposed during these raids are handcuffed and put under deportation proceedings. Employers however, are threefold losers; they lose employees who lack proper authorization, come under the government eye for hiring illegals and also face the wrath of the labor unions who accuse them of betraying their workers. Companies like Mi Pueblo that cater to immigrants are faced with a distinctive problem: Aarti Kohli, an immigration policy expert at the University of California, Berkeley said that such companies are perceived as job-providers for a particular community, but there is a sense of betrayal when immigration authorities round them up and deport them. The companies are also caught in a moral dilemma, they want to help them, but legally they are not supposed to be doing so. UFCW organizing director Gerardo Dominguez called Mi Pueblo a traitor and said that by checking their immigration status the message the company was sending to the community was that we cannot give you a job, but we want your dollars. Mi Pueblo, which means "My Home" grosses upwards of \$300 million each year. Mi Pueblo management said they had no choice to but to implement the E-Verify program insisted upon by the immigration authorities as the government was auditing the company's hiring records and checking to see if it was hiring illegal immigrants.