



Millions of workers like Zavala toil in industries like construction, casual day labour, agriculture or the food industry across America and, as Zavala and many others have found, standing up and complaining can result in an employer reporting them to the immigration authorities.

Experts point out that some employers are all too eager to take on undocumented workers and exploit them for their willingness to work long hours for low pay. If no one complains, questions about immigration papers are rarely asked. But if problems do arise – such as being injured on the job or workers demanding better pay or access to a union – a swift phone call to the police or ICE will result in the difficult employees being deported.

"Employers use this as a huge club against workers who stand up for themselves," said Rebecca Smith, an expert at the National Employment Law Project, which campaigns on various worker abuse issues in the US.

Smith recently co-authored a study of the phenomenon for NELP called Workers Rights on ICE, which chronicled many recent cases where the threat of deportation had been used against workers who tried to unionise or complained about safety standards or had their wages stolen. But Smith believes that because most victims are either deported or afraid of being deported the vast majority of incidents taking place in America simply never come to light. "It is the tip of an iceberg," she said.

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