AGRICULTURE IMMIGRATION

Despite threat of mass deportation, immigrant workers and Wisconsin dairy farmers carry on

BY: **RUTH CONNIFF** - JANUARY 10, 2025 5:45 AM

A Wisconsin barn in winter. | Photo by Gregory Conniff for Wisconsin Examiner

President-elect Donald Trump's pledge to deport millions of undocumented immigrants shortly after he takes office on Jan. 20 has triggered a flood of calls to advocates and local officials in Wisconsin.

"There is palpable fear and anxiety with our clients," said Carmel Capati, managing immigration attorney for the Catholic Multicultural Center in Madison. Capati and another immigration

attorney, Aissa Olivares of Dane County's Community Immigration Law Center, gave a presentation during a Dec. 27 community forum on immigrant rights organized by former state Rep. Samba Baldeh (D-Madison).

Former state Rep. Samba Baldeh | official photo

"As we anticipate a change of national leadership, immigrant communities across our state are fearful of what may be coming," Baldeh said."It is essential that we as elected officials address that fear, stand up for the rule of law, and advocate for human rights-based policies that acknowledge the contributions of immigrants – who are our neighbors, co-workers, and friends."

"There is still a lot of uncertainty," Dane County Sheriff Kalvin Barrett said during the forum, which was held on Zoom. "No one knows what's going to happen." But, Barrett assured participants, "We will not be proactively involved in any sort of round-ups, any sort of immigration enforcement."

During their presentation, the immigration attorneys addressed the concerns of university students, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) recipients, refugees and people from countries eligible for Temporary Protected Status during the administration of President Joe Biden – a status they said they expect Trump to revoke. Wisconsin's immigrant residents should apply for benefits still available to them under the Biden administration, the lawyers said, to get their identity documents in order, and to make an emergency plan in case they are detained, including designating someone to pick up their children from school.

"It's very important that we do avoid situations where we might be subject to arrest," said Olivares. "And if unknown people are knocking on your door, don't open the door."

'How in the hell will we continue to be the Dairy State?'

Nowhere would mass deportation have a bigger impact than on Wisconsin's dairy farms, where an estimated 70% of the workforce is made up of immigrants, mostly from Mexico and Central America. Because Congress has never created a year-round visa for low-skilled farm workers, almost all of Wisconsin's immigrant dairy workers are undocumented. Without them, experts say, the whole industry would collapse.

At a Jan. 3 press conference in the Capitol, Wisconsin Gov. Tony Evers called the threat of mass deportation “illogical,” and said “we will do everything in our power to prevent it.”

Gov. Tony Evers at his Jan 3 press conference in the State Capitol. | Photo by Ruth Conniff/Wisconsin Examiner

“The bottom line is, in Wisconsin, 70% of our farms … 70% of the people may be part of the federal government’s idea to move them elsewhere, out of our country,” Evers said. “Think about that. How in the hell will we continue to be the Dairy State with no one to milk the cows and do the other important work?”

Yet, despite the existential threat posed to dairy workers and Wisconsin’s marquee industry by Trump’s proposed roundups, during a recent reporting trip to rural Buffalo County – a heavy dairy producing area in Western Wisconsin – workers, farmers and local law enforcement officials told the Examiner they were not scrambling to prepare for raids.

“What are we going to do? We can’t do anything,” said a dairy worker from Mexico who goes by the nickname Junior and who works for Buffalo County dairy farmer John Rosenow. “We can’t hide. All we do is work, go home, go back to work, back home, back to work.”

“We all came here not for fun but out of necessity,” he added, speaking about the estimated 10,000 immigrant dairy workers in Wisconsin.

Junior, 19, has been working on Rosenow's farm for the last year and a half, sending home money to help support his 3-year-old daughter. Like many of his co-workers, he came north to milk cows because the average wage for dairy workers, at $11 per hour, is far more than he could earn in Mexico, where a factory job pays the U.S. equivalent of just $20 per week. For decades, Mexican workers on Rosenow's farm and other farms in the area have saved enough money to build houses, start businesses, and put their children through school back in Mexico.

The risks these workers have taken to come here include walking across the desert at night, evading kidnappers, and nearly suffocating while being smuggled in the trunk of a car. It can take a full year of work, rising at 4 a.m. to milk cows and shovel out barns, just to pay off a typical $12,000 debt to smugglers for a border crossing. Compared to all of that, workers say anti-immigrant political rhetoric does not seem like the biggest threat many of them face — especially those from Mexico who came to Wisconsin to build a better life, not, like many asylum-seekers, to flee violent persecution in their home country.

"I haven't heard any workers ask about what might happen in the new administration," said translator Mercedes Falk, who travels among about 20 farms in the Buffalo County area, interpreting for farmers and workers. "Farmers and workers are continuing to work side by side because they know that they are the ones that will make sure the cows are taken care of and the farms run smoothly. I think they both have been doing the work for so long that they understand that no one else is going to step in to do the work if it's not them."

"In our area, which is typical of most any dairy farm area in the country, most all farms with over 100 cows have immigrants working for them," Rosenow said.

Rosenow, an outspoken advocate for his workers, helped found the nonprofit Puentes/Bridges, which takes dairy farmers from Wisconsin and Minnesota on an annual trip to rural Mexico, to see the homes and businesses their workers are building with the money they earn in the U.S. Falk, the translator, leads these trips.

"Trump says Mexico is not sending us their best," Rosenow said during one such trip in 2019. "These Mexican towns *are* sending us their best when they send their young men up north." His former workers, he said, have returned home to become leaders in their

communities, local employers, and important supporters of two economies – in Wisconsin and in Mexico.

John Rosenow tours a house one of the workers on his farm is sending home money to build in Veracruz, Mexico, during a Puentes/Bridges trip in 2019. | Photo by Ruth Conniff/Wisconsin Examiner

Mexican workers sent home $51.6 billion from U.S. jobs to help the Mexican economy in 2021, accounting for 4% of Mexico's GDP (oil and gas only accounts for 3.3% of GDP for this petroleum producing country).

But while former President Andrés Manuel López Obrador called those workers "living heroes," Trump has called them criminals and rapists and promised to send them all home.

In rural Wisconsin, which voted heavily for Trump, some farmers who support Trump have told the Examiner they don't believe he intends to deport their hardworking employees – that his real targets are criminals. But Trump made all undocumented immigrants a priority for deportation in his first term, unlike Biden, whose immigration policy has focused on deporting those who committed crimes or posed a threat to national security.

Photo by Gregory Conniff for Wisconsin Examiner

Republican U.S. Rep. Derrick Van Orden, whose district ecompasses a large swath of Western Wisconsin, including Buffalo County, sits on the House Agriculture Committee. Van Orden made cracking down on "criminal illegal aliens" a centerpiece of his 2024 reelection campaign. At a press conference in September, he highlighted a violent attack on a woman by a Venezuelan immigrant to denounce U.S. immigration policy. Van Orden acknowledged at that event that dairy farmers in his district rely on immigrant labor, but then went on to praise the H2A seasonal farmwork visa, which is not applicable to dairy farm work.

"I'm 100% behind making sure that we get as many people into the country lawfully to help support our industries," Van Orden said. "I'm absolutely, adamantly opposed to letting a single known criminal enter this country, because this is what happens."

Campaign rhetoric about crimes committed by immigrants runs counter to studies that show lower crime rates among immigrants in the U.S. than among U.S.-born residents.

During Evers' press conference earlier this month, a reporter pressed the governor on whether he believed undocumented immigrants who commit crimes should be deported.

"What crime, speeding?" Evers asked. "Violent crimes," the reporter clarified.

"It shouldn't be treated any differently," Evers said. Both immigrants and U.S. citizens should be prosecuted and put in prison if they were guilty of crimes, he added. "Serving that time is equally important for someone that is documented and someone that is not."

The view from Buffalo County

In Buffalo County, local law enforcement officers told the Examiner they have not seen more crime among the immigrant population than among U.S. born residents of the area. Instead, police say, they can often be the victims.

Recently, Buffalo County Deputy Sheriff Aarik Lackershire got a call from Rosenow's dairy farm. A worker there had asked Rosenow to lend him $1,500 to pay off a U.S. official who was demanding money and telling the worker he had to pay or be prosecuted for a crime.

Rosenow suspected his employee, Junior, was being scammed. Instead of loaning him the money, he called the sheriff. Lackershire arrived on the farm, Rosenow recalled, "with coke-bottle glasses, wearing full riot gear – leather, with a gun on his belt … I swear he was 18 at the most."

Relations between local law enforcement and the immigrant workers on Wisconsin dairy farms have become strained in recent years because of workers' fear of deportation. During the first Trump administration, high-profile raids and a hostile political climate caused some workers to return to their home countries while others simply stopped going out. Many live on the farms where they work and avoid contact with the police. Rosenow has fewer than a dozen

A cow peers out of the milking parlor on Rosenow's farm. | Photo by Ruth Conniff/Wisconsin Examiner

employees and most of them, young men and a few women, came up from Mexico without their families and live in a barracks on the farm to save money and send more home.

Lackershire did not come to Rosenow's farm to arrest Junior. Instead, the deputy spent a long time talking to him in Rosenow's office, next to the milking parlor, listening carefully and explaining to Junior that he had been the victim of a scam.

"He obviously wanted to help," said Rosenow. "The next day I was in Alma, so I stopped at the sheriff's office to thank them for doing such a great job."

Farmers and workers in rural Wisconsin say they hope the national anti-immigrant climate will blow over, and that they can't afford to abandon an economic relationship both groups depend on for their livelihoods. Throughout rural Wisconsin, immigrant workers and the state's U.S.-born residents continue to coexist and, in many cases, try to help each other, as Lackershire did for Junior.

'They don't know who they can trust'

At first, when Lackershire showed up at Rosenow's farm, Junior was reluctant to talk. "It's a person you don't know, and you're telling him things – you feel nervous," he said in an interview later, in Spanish, recalling the scene. But Lackershire spent a lot of time listening patiently to Junior's story,

Immigrants are required by law to attest that they are authorized to work in the United States, and employers must review their documents "to determine whether they reasonably appear to be genuine and relate to the employee" — a standard which does not put a heavy onus on employers to carefully scrutinize the documents. Employers of must keep an employment eligibility verification form — From I-9 — on file for each employee for three years.

In addition, the IRS allows immigrants who don't have a Social Security number to file taxes using an Individual Taxpayer Number (ITN) — a resource advocates have encouraged undocumented workers to use to claim tax credits and other benefits for their families, and to establish

with the assistance of Falk, the interpreter, whom Rosenow called and put on speaker phone. Lackershire explained to Junior that the person who called him demanding payment could not have been a U.S. official, since the call came from outside the United States.

"After that he warmed up a little bit," Lackershire recalled in an interview, sitting at the dining room table at his home in Durand. It was a convoluted extortion scam involving three different callers, one posing as a woman with a sick child who needed help, one as a law enforcement officer, and one as a friend of Junior's from Mexico. Lackershire said he's encountered many similar scams, but this was "probably the most layered one I've dealt with."

"He's telling me about three different people, three different stories, and none of it's making sense," Lackershire recalled. "Wow. So that was an obstacle. And obviously, doing all this through translators, some stuff gets lost in translation."

their work history for possible future use in obtaining legal immigration status.

For years, dairy farmers have lobbied Congress to create a visa for year-round agricultural workers, expanding on the H-2A agricultural visa program which can only be used by seasonal workers. In 2021, the House passed the Farm Workforce Modernization Act with broad bipartisan support. Among other provisions, it created a visa for immigrant workers who stay in the U.S. year-round. (All of Wisconsin's Republican House members voted against the bill and all Wisconsin Democrats voted for it.) Sponsors of the Senate version of the bill — Sen. Michael Bennet (D-Colorado) and Sen. Mike Crapo (R-Idaho) struggled to get agreement on controversial provisions. Among the sticking points was an expansion of labor protections opposed by the American Farm Bureau Federation that would have allowed farmworkers to sue their employers.

Falk said she was impressed with Lackershire's patience. "I never got a sense of any ounce of frustration from him even though it was a long interaction at 9 p.m.," she said. The whole experience, she added, "gave me a newfound appreciation for humanity and how empowering it is to connect on a human level in spite of speaking different languages and being from different cultures."

Scammers target people of all backgrounds, Lackershire said. But immigrants are particularly vulnerable and, in his experience, are more frequently shaken down for large sums of money.

Deputy Aarik Lackershire | Photo by Ruth Conniff/Wisconsin Examiner

"It seems like they take more advantage of immigrants because they don't know the legal system of the U.S.," Lackershire said.

"This group of people obviously has a fear of being sent back to where they came from," he added. "They don't know who they can trust."

That lack of trust makes it harder for law enforcement to do its job.

"We have to go to every 911 call, and we've had hang-ups at worker barracks at 4 in the morning," Lackershire said. "And obviously going around knocking on doors as a police officer at 4 in the morning on a primarily illegal population stirs everybody up and they get nervous. The intention is to see if somebody needs help, and a lot of people aren't even willing to talk."

Over time, Lackershire feels he has gained the confidence of people who used to avoid him. Some will now translate for him on occasion. Lackershire himself grew up in the area and went to school with the children of immigrant farm workers. "They are just trying to support their families, which I respect," he said.

'We treat the immigrant workers and nonimmigrant workers the same'

When, in October 2023, Minnesota stopped requiring proof of legal residency to get a driver's license, Lackershire began carrying around handouts from a Minnesota immigrant rights group to give to the unlicensed immigrant drivers he pulls over, encouraging them to get a Minnesota license. (The Wisconsin Legislature changed state law in 2007 to bar undocumented immigrants from obtaining driver's licenses.)

Lackershire said he sees a lot of immigrant drivers in Wisconsin who have registered and insured their vehicles in Minnesota, "trying to do the best they can." But he still hands out a lot of tickets in Wisconsin for driving without a license. "That's not something we typically make an arrest for; that's usually a traffic ticket," he said. But after they get too many tickets, unlicensed drivers in Wisconsin are treated as though their licenses have been revoked, Lackershire explained, "and then it's a driving after revocation. And that's actually a criminal charge." Criminal charges can trigger an immigration hold and deportation proceedings.

Voces de la Frontera and allied organizations held a lobby day at the Capitol during the Day Without Latinos and Essential Workers general strike in 2022. | Photo | Isiah Holmes/Wisconsin Examiner

Having a lot of unlicensed drivers on the road creates a public safety hazard.

Lackershire's boss, Buffalo County Sheriff Mike Osmond, said in a phone interview that he and his deputies often come upon abandoned cars that are registered to people with no driver's license and left in a ditch after a crash. "If they are immigrant workers, they

Currently 19 states and the District of Columbia allow unauthorized immigrants to obtain driver's licenses. In Minnesota, applicants must pass a driving test, have insurance and a Minnesota address where they can receive their license in the mail, but they do not have to provide proof of residency, according

tend to not stick around," he said.

to the Minnesota Department of Public Safety.

"We treat the immigrant workers and nonimmigrant workers the same," Osmond added. "If you're the victim of a crime, I want our deputies to spend time and educate you. We're not out there looking for immigrant workers."

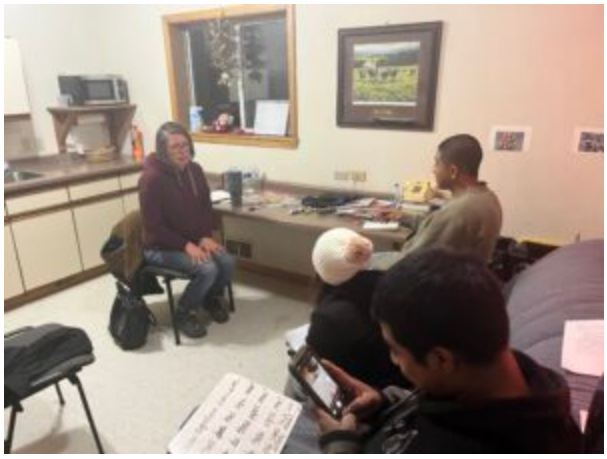
As for the possibility that his department might be asked to help with mass deportations, Osmond said he's not worried. "I guess I'll figure it out when it happens, if it happens," he said. He's not prepared to say what his department policy will be on cooperating with federal immigration agents.

"In my entire career I don't know I've ever had a request from a federal agency to help with immigration, except once when there was an ICE hold on someone in the jail," he said. That was during the first Trump administration.

"If President-elect Donald Trump was sitting in the passenger seat of my truck right now, I'd tell him to deport the people out of the jails and prisons – these are folks who've come here and committed a crime."

'I have a lot of goals, a lot of dreams'

Falk teaches a regular Monday night English class on Rosenow's farm.



Mercedes Falk teaches an English class to workers on John Rosenow's farm. | Photo by Ruth Conniff/Wisconsin Examiner

On a recent December evening, she greeted Junior as he came out of Rosenow's milking parlor, as three people in their early twenties – two young men and one young woman – arrived for class. The three students laughed and teased each other as they took turns translating the sentences Falk wrote on a white board.

Junior, standing off to the side, said he had taken Lackershire's advice and blocked the people who scammed him. He was glad he'd only given them $600.

Junior's father also clocked out of the milking parlor while the English class was going on. He had been on the farm for the last four years, he said, and was planning to go home to Mexico next year.

"It's always next year," one of Falk's students said, laughing. His father, who also works on the farm and sends home money to the rest of the family, says the same thing every year, he added.

As for Junior, "I just have a couple of years left. That's enough for me, then I'll go back," he said.

In that time, he hopes he'll have enough money to build a house. "I have a lot of goals," he said, "a lot of dreams."

This is the first installment in an Examiner series on immigration in Wisconsin.

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Ruth Conniff is Editor-in-chief of the Wisconsin Examiner. She formerly served as Editor-in-chief of The Progressive Magazine where she worked for many years from both Madison and Washington, DC. Shortly after Donald Trump took office she moved with her family to Oaxaca, Mexico, and covered U.S./Mexico relations, the migrant caravan, and Mexico's

efforts to grapple with Trump. Conniff is the author of "Milked: How an American Crisis Brought Together Midwestern Dairy Farmers and Mexican Workers" which won the 2022 Studs and Ida Terkel award from The New Press. She is a frequent guest on MSNBC and has appeared on Good Morning America, Democracy Now!, Wisconsin Public Radio, CNN, Fox News and many other radio and television outlets. She has also written for The Nation, The New York Times, The Washington Post, and The Los Angeles Times, among other publications. She lives in Madison, Wisconsin with her husband and three daughters.

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