

LA's Protests Have Ended But Fashion Can't Shake Off Its Fear

Following the ICE raids and a week of protests, the city's fashion employers continue to fret about what's to come as the White House continues its deportation campaign.

By Cathaleen Chen, Liz Flora



LOS ANGELES – The streets around the downtown federal building are mostly quiet again, after more than a week of protests against the Trump administration's immigration raids. But even as the dust settles, the city's fashion industry — from luxury flagships on Melrose Boulevard to denim factories and packing warehouses — cannot shake off the fear and anxiety about what might be coming next.

"There is chaos in the entire city," said the founder of one large fashion manufacturer in LA on Monday, who asked for anonymity for fear of retaliation from the Trump administration. "There is disruption to retail, to management and business overall."

The protests began on June 6, after Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents raided several LA businesses, including a warehouse operated by Ambiance Apparel. Though mostly peaceful, images of burning cars and demonstrators clashing with police circulated online. Those incidents were cited by President Donald Trump in his deployment of the National Guard and Marines to keep order, a near-unprecedented move that raised concerns the situation would escalate further.

By Tuesday, however, roads around The Geffen Contemporary at MOCA, which had been heavily patrolled by police officers days before, were clear, and a curfew was lifted. Many downtown stores have reopened and taken down their plywood barricades.

But the fate of the 40 garment workers swept up in that initial raid is still in limbo. One was deported, while others remain in detention along with hundreds of others in LA's Metropolitan Detention Center. Lindsay Toczylowski, an attorney and co-founder of the Immigrant Defenders Law Center, said she has faced barriers in gaining access to clients being held at the center.

Many in the city's diverse workforce of more than 45,000 cutters, sewers and finishers — some with legal status, others undocumented — feel as if they are living under the constant threat of apprehension and deportation, LA designers and fashion professionals said.

"These are people that are even with papers and everything," said Corey Populus, founder of the LA-based streetwear brand Circulate, which works with local screen printers. "They're just feeling like they're being targeted regardless if they're legal or illegal."

Retailers, grocers and restaurants in areas with a high Latino population have posted declines in traffic and sales as many immigrant consumers are too afraid to leave their homes, *The Wall Street Journal* reported last week. The LA manufacturer said he'd noticed a dip in sales at his brand's store, which is outside the downtown area where most of the protests occurred.

"It's not just in LA and it's not just garment workers," one fashion executive in New York told *The Business of Fashion* last week. "Think about all the immigrant students at schools like Parsons and FIT."





Already the cards are stacked against these graduates who need to be sponsored to work. And now this is happening — think about the brain drain that we'll see later on."

An even greater unknown is what may be coming next. Trump promised on social media over the weekend to "expand efforts" to round up undocumented immigrants in major cities. He has also said ICE will not target workers in farms, hotels or restaurants, a directive that was later reversed. Administration officials have also continued to float using the Insurrection Act, a rarely used 19th century law allowing the use of the military on domestic soil, a move opponents say would quickly ratchet up tensions around any future protests.

There is also the spectre of CECOT, the infamous prison in El Salvador where undocumented immigrants were sent earlier this year. Among them were Toczylowski's client Andry José Hernández Romero, a gay makeup artist from Venezuela seeking asylum in the US.

"The Trump Administration is committed to fulfilling the President's promise to the American people: enforcing federal immigration law," White House spokesperson Abigail Jackson told BoF in an email statement. "While the President is focused on immediately removing dangerous criminal illegal aliens from the country, anyone who is here illegally is liable to be deported."

Be Prepared

In the LA fashion scene, streetwear brands, many of which rely on local manufacturing and screenprinting, have been especially vocal about opposing the ICE raids. Several have launched merch to benefit the cause of immigrant rights. Born x Raised dropped a "Protect Los Angeles" sweatshirt Tuesday with all proceeds going to the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights.

Big brands and fashion trade organisations have been largely absent from the conversation, either to express an opinion on the raids or to offer advice to employers that might come into contact with ICE. The Council of Fashion Designers of America did not respond to a request for comment.

"There's a vacuum of help," said the LA manufacturer. "The city of LA or the county should have some guidelines. No one wants to step in and say this is an important industry."

According to the National Immigration Law Center, which published an online guide to ICE raids, employers should make a plan, practice the plan like a fire drill. The organisation advises that employees should be trained to not speak to agents and understand their rights, including that officers need a judicial warrant to enter private spaces inside a workplace.

Employees can tell ICE agents, "I can't give you permission to enter. You must speak with my employer," or not interact with them at all, according to the NILC guide. After a raid, employers should record details of the event including how many agents were present, notify the employee union, if there is one, and connect with immigration response networks to seek family, legal and media support for affected employees.

Last week, Pistola, an LA-based denim label, created its own protocol in case of a raid and communicated the plan in a town hall meeting with employees, according to founder and creative director Grace Na.

As of Wednesday, the panic among Pistola's 50 or so warehouse employees has faded and business is back to normal, she said. But as the White House continues its mass deportation campaign, she's unsure how long things will stay calm.

"Trump has to really think about the American fashion industry," Na added. "It's hard finding labour to begin with. He's promoting domestic manufacturing but it's not going to work if people have a fear of working in America."

