Slaughterhouse Manager Acquitted in Child Labor Case

WATERLOO, Iowa (AP) — A former slaughterhouse manager embraced his attorneys and slapped them on the back Monday as a jury acquitted him of allowing minors to work at a meatpacking plant in Iowa.

But former Agriprocessors Inc. executive Sholom Rubashkin still faces sentencing June 22 in federal court, where he was convicted earlier of financial fraud. Prosecutors have asked for a 25-year sentence in that case, much more than Rubashkin would have faced if convicted on all 67 misdemeanor counts of child labor violations in state court. Rubashkin's attorney has asked for a six-year sentence in the federal case.

Rubashkin was charged in both cases following a May 2008 immigration raid at the former Agriprocessors slaughterhouse in Postville, where 389 workers, including children, were arrested on immigration charges.

After Monday's verdict, Rubashkin's defense attorney said his client had been "vindicated as a human being." Prosecutors had claimed Rubashkin, whose father owned the slaughterhouse, knowingly employed underage workers, exposed them to dangerous chemicals, allowed them to operate power machinery and allowed them to work more time per day and per week than is legal.

The defense maintained the plant's hiring process was flawed and dysfunctional but Rubashkin didn't knowingly hire minors. Defense attorney F. Montgomery Brown said the jury's verdict was "a flat-out vindication that this man did not want young people in his father's plant."

Deputy Iowa Attorney General Thomas H. Miller said he was disappointed by the verdict, but added the case shone a spotlight on vulnerable populations in Iowa and those who abused them.

Twenty-six former Agriprocessors employees from Guatemala and Mexico testified they had worked at the plant as teenagers in 2007 and 2008 and that they were hired after providing false documents showing they were older.

"We feel the humane treatment of workers in this state, whether they be documented or not, is important to the upholding of the law and values of the state of Iowa," Miller said.

After the verdict, Black Hawk County Associate Judge Nathan Callahan called it a complex case and noted that it never came down to a simple question of whether children worked in the plant.

The defense repeatedly reminded jurors that they had to find that the evidence proved beyond a reasonable doubt that Rubashkin "intentionally, deliberately and knowingly" allowed children to work there.

Jury foreman Quentin Hart, a Waterloo City Councilman, said he and the other the panelists tended to distrust the accounts of the alleged child laborers because they testified to lying about their ages to law enforcement officials and presented false documents to Agriprocessors.

"Each one of them indicated they didn't tell the truth and indicated they knew they had to be over the age of 18 to get a job, so they acquired documentation from somewhere," Hart said.

Prosecutors also failed to show a clear connection between Rubashkin and the 26 children named in the case, he said. And, the jury was influenced by testimony that plant officials fired some minors when they were discovered, and that some minors were rejected for employment, he said.

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