

'A Day Without Immigrants'

Monday , May 01, 2006

NEW YORK —

Illegal immigrants and their allies took to streets across America Monday to take part in "Un Dia Sin Inmigrantes" — "A Day Without Immigrants" — in an effort to show their economic importance to the country.

Many are protesting proposed moves by the federal government to further criminalize being in the United States illegally and to restrict the number of undocumented aliens in the country. There are an estimated 11 million illegal immigrants currently living in the United States.

An estimated 300,000 people gathered by early afternoon in Chicago, and hundreds of thousands more were expected later at rallies in New York and Los Angeles. Rallies were also held in cities like Dallas, Denver and Houston. Smaller events were planned in more than 50 other cities across the nation, even in places as Connecticut and South Dakota.

Protesters boycotted work, school and shopping; some worked Monday but bought nothing. Some attended protests during lunch breaks or after work. Church services, candlelight vigils, picnics and human chains also were planned.

Industries that rely on immigrant workers were clearly affected, though the impact was not uniform. The construction and nursery industries were among the hardest hit by the work stoppage in Florida.

In Carmel, Ind., Jeff Salsbery said about 25 Hispanic workers skipped work at his landscaping company.

"I'm not very happy this morning," Salsbery said. "We're basically shut down in our busiest month of the year. It's going to cost me thousands of dollars today."

Some local Houston businesses shut their doors, fearing that most of their employees wouldn't show up to work. Some companies said they lost at least \$10,000 by closing.

Lunch truck operator Sammy Rodriguez, 77, said 100 trucks normally line up in the mornings outside the California United Terminals in Long Beach. On Monday, he said, just three or four showed up.

Normally bustling Los Angeles-area restaurants and markets were dark and truckers avoided the nation's largest shipping port. In downtown LA, it appeared about one in three small businesses was closed.

But in Minnesota, managers at eight plants operated by Hormel Foods Corp. reported normal levels of absences, said spokeswoman Julie Craven.

But there is also a movement countering that of the illegal immigrants' taking place.

"You should send all of the 13 million aliens home, then you take all of the welfare recipients who are taking a free check and make them do those jobs," said Jack Culberson, a retired Army colonel who attended a Pensacola rally. "It's as simple as that."

A group of Hispanic Americans calling themselves, "You Don't Speak for Me," participated in a Washington news conference Monday in support of strong border security.

Led by Ret. Army Col. Al Rodriguez, the coalition formed to dispel the impression that all Hispanic Americans support those who are trying to disrupt the nation on May 1.

"As the demands of illegal aliens and their supporters become ever more shrilled and outrageous, the silent majority of Americans are remaining silent no longer. We are proud and delighted that will give a voice to the millions of hard-working, law-abiding Hispanic Americans whose views are too often misrepresented," said Dan Stein, president of the Federation for American Immigration Reform, which organized the coalition.

"These people have been telling us for a long time they hate to be treated like criminals. What they're doing today, throughout the whole country, is behaving just like that," Claudia Spencer, a member of You Don't Speak for Me, told FOX News. "We feel really really offended ... they are hurting everything in the United States, including us, the legal Latinos."

A group called "Defend Colorado Now" was holding an opposition rally Monday. That group wants to deny state services to illegal immigrants. In Colorado alone, 462 bills related to immigration or immigrants were introduced in the Legislature; only about 10 percent are expected to pass.

At a Phoenix Home Depot store targeted by immigrants rights activists, several people also gathered to voice their support for tough immigration laws.

Houston is a city of just under 2 million people; 37 percent of its population is Hispanic. While the city has always been welcoming to immigrants, that positive view may be changing.

A 2006 Houston-area survey says if cost were not a factor, 50 percent of people polled would favor a 2,000-mile security fence along the U.S.-Mexico border to stop illegal immigration. The poll also shows a change in Houstonian's desire to reduce that number of new immigrants coming to America — spiking to more than 50 percent for the first time since 1998.

Republican National Committeeman Randy Pullen, a key supporter of an Arizona law passed in 2004 to limit public services for illegal immigrants, believed the demonstrations would backfire.

"I think it galvanizes average Americans into believing that there's a real problem that needs to be solved," he said. "The other thing that I think is important to note is these demonstrators here today do not speak for law-abiding Latino American citizens."

'We Die in the Desert for Beans'

Protesters formed human chains throughout New York City's five boroughs to protest a bill that would make it a felony to be in the country illegally. A few shops were shuttered along Manhattan's bustling 14th Street, including a Spanish-language bookstore and a tiny restaurant selling Cuban sandwiches and other Latin American fare.

"This will symbolize the interdependence of all of us, not just immigrants, but all of society," said Chung-Wa Hong, executive director of the New York Immigration Coalition.

Several thousand protesters marched in Orlando, locking arms and waving banners with messages such as "We die in the desert for beans."

Francisco Lizamo, 33, of El Salvador, got the day off, along with the 46 other employees at the construction company where he works.

"I haven't been able to see my mom in 10 years," he said through a translator. "I'm worried that if I left I wouldn't be able to get back."

Delazar Hernandez, said he filed to become a legal U.S. resident seven years ago and it still waiting. On Monday, the construction worker draped an American flag around his shoulders while attending an event in Houston.

"At my company we build hospitals, schools and other buildings and it's all been because of illegal workers," said Hernandez, who is originally from Mexico. "They don't seem to recognize that."

About 1,200 people marched Monday in the rural city of Homestead, home to one Florida's largest Mexican immigrant populations and many major growers of fruits, vegetables and nursery plants. Some protestors participated in an ecumenical mass before heading to a larger mass of all protestors in the Miami area at the Orange Bowl Stadium.

Bill Spann, executive vice president of the Association of General Contractors, said more than half the workers at construction sites in Miami-Dade County did not show up Monday.

Jose Cruz, 23, from El Salvador, said he took off the day from his construction job to attend the rally.

"If I lose my job, it's worth it," said Cruz, who has a temporary work permit that is granted to many Central Americans. "It's worth losing several jobs to get my papers."

The impact on schools was not so clear. In Santa Ana, the Orange County seat, about 3,000 middle and high school students were absent. The 62,000-student district is about 90 percent Hispanic.

Activists in Florida said many immigrants were concerned about recent federal raids, in which

hundreds of immigrants with criminal backgrounds were rounded up in Florida and throughout the Midwest.

An estimated 50,000 were expected to turn out for Colorado's protests. The tone in the Denver area, however, was a little more subdued than that in areas such as Los Angeles, where protesters are advocating amnesty for all illegals. Many participants in Denver's rallies say they want to become Americans through the proper channels; their mantra is, "Si, se puede," or "yes, we can."

"We are the backbone of what America is, legal or illegal, it doesn't matter," said Melanie Lugo, who was among thousands attending a rally in Denver with her husband and their third-grade daughter. "We butter each other's bread. They need us as much as we need them."

Some big businesses shut down operations: Six of 14 Perdue Farms plants closed; Gallo Wines in Sonoma, Calif., gave its 150 employees the day off; Tyson Foods Inc., the world's largest meat producer, shut five of its nine beef plants and four of six pork plants.

In Denver, El Centro Humanitario, a nonprofit set up to help day laborers, was closed Monday because its managers were helping organize a rally downtown.

But there was little change at Labor Finders, a temporary office with several offices in the Denver area, spokesman Tim Kaffer said.

"The people who come in here really can't afford to take a day off," he said. "Their daily pay just takes care of their hotel and food."

Immigrants at Houston's rally Monday said this is not about a day off of work, it's about seeking justice.

"We're trying to help this country like we're helping our family, too, because my family depend on me too but I working hard and I not say to somebody else, 'give me money for nothing,' I work here, I helping the people, I paying taxes," said Houston resident Alma Lima.

Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa urged students to stay in school and advised protesters against waving flags of their native countries.

"You should wave the American flag," he said. "It's the flag of the country that we all are proud of and want to be a part of. Don't disrespect the traditions of this country."

Leaders of a rally in Chicago representing the city's Arab, Asian, black, eastern European and Hispanic communities, along with labor groups and religious leaders, urged immigrant workers to ask for time off and encouraged students to get permission to attend the demonstration.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops urged immigrants to attend Mass instead of boycotting, and suggested that churches toll their bells in memory of immigrants who died trying to come to the U.S. They also urged students to stay in school.

FOX News' Carol McKinley, Kim McIntyre and The Associated Press contributed to this report.