

denver & the west | day without a immigrant

A roar for respect

LOCAL: 75,000 join Capitol throng for "We Are America" –

NATION: Over 1 million march in cities coast to coast
DISSENT: Debate turns loud, lively at counterprotest

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Tens of thousands of immigrant- rights supporters chanting "We are America" marched through downtown Monday, their energy level intensifying as they poured onto the Capitol lawn in a sea of white shirts and American flags.

The crowd, estimated at 75,000 by Denver police, was part of a national day of action to draw attention to immigration rights. Wearing white to symbolize a peaceful protest, they carried signs saying "We are not criminals" and "Liberty and justice for all."

Marchers with air horns led the others in chants on the 3-mile walk from Viking Park in northwest Denver to the Capitol. "Aquí estamos y no nos vamos, y si nos hecha, nosotros regresaremos!" they shouted, or "Here we are and we're not leaving, and if you throw us out, we will return."

The Denver march was one of dozens across the nation.

In Chicago, police estimated the crowd at 400,000. In Los Angeles, one official estimated the crowd at about 300,000.

Tens of thousands more marched in New York, and 15,000 walked through Houston.

Police departments in more than two dozen U.S. cities contacted by The Associated Press gave estimates that totaled about 1.1 million marchers.

"We do have the right to live wherever we decide," said Denver protester Julio Fernandez Andrade, from Zacatecas, Mexico, who said he has lived in the United States for 37 years without documentation. "We are not criminals. We are not terrorists."

Andrade, who said he has worked as a truck driver and an oil field hand, carried a sign that said: "Somos America" - "We Are America."

Carlos Lara, who said he sneaked across the border from Tijuana in 1980 but now is an American citizen, said he was overcome with pride as he stood on the Capitol steps and watched thousands of people stream down Broadway.

"This is the first time in my whole life I've seen this many people together," Lara said, touching his hand over his heart. "In my heart, I feel so excited. My blood is running."

Lara, a construction worker, said building projects around the state stopped for the march.

"When we build a house, it's all Mexican-American people doing the job," he said.

The nationwide call for a shopping boycott and walkouts from school and work was intended to draw attention to immigration-reform plans being considered in Congress and to underscore the role Latino workers play in the economy.

"We should admire them for cleaning our buildings, building our homes, preparing our food, producing our oil, working our mines, cleaning our hotels, mowing our lawns, digging our ditches, and yes, even fighting our wars," former Denver Mayor Federico Peña shouted through a microphone in his address to marchers.

The crowd - at least those who were close enough to hear him - yelled back, "God Bless America" and "Si se puede," loosely translated as "Yes, we can."

Thousands of other marchers, who stretched across Broadway and Lincoln Street and into Civic Center, could hear only muffled noise. Every few minutes a rallying cry would spread down the hill, and thousands of American flags and some Mexican ones flapped overhead.

The march was mostly peaceful. A few opponents of illegal immigration gathered along the route.

About a dozen state patrol officers stood on the Capitol balcony, some watching the crowd with binoculars.

After the nearly two-hour rally, organizer Ricardo Martinez with Padres Unidos took to the microphone to ask marchers not to fight.

Hundreds of marchers passed a counterprotest of about 100 people at the Greek Theater in Civic Center.

"Go back to Mexico," yelled some, carrying signs that said "Illegals have no rights except to leave" and "Reform Mexico, not U.S.A."

"Go back to Europe," marchers answered.

Parade marshals, dressed in red T-shirts with an image of Denver's late Chicano activist Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzáles, lined up to separate the groups. As the crowd grew larger and louder, police stepped in to reinforce the line.

War of words and traffic

The size of the crowd began building early. But angry words never spilled over into scuffles, police report.

Denver police spokesman Sonny Jackson said the only problems were related to traffic tie-ups. The march snarled traffic along Speer Boulevard and shut down the 16th Street Mall bus.

Police officers told people parked at barricades along the route they would have to wait an hour and a half, leaving them to rearrange appointments on their cellphones.

Excitement began to build Monday morning as families with strollers, teenagers wearing American flag bandanas on their heads and couples in white trekked up Federal Boulevard toward the meeting spot.

Many carried backpacks or coolers filled with food and water. They spilled out of Viking Park at West 29th Avenue and Federal, and down sidewalks along Speer.

It took nearly 45 minutes for the crowd to empty the park, and about that long for the first marchers to arrive at the Capitol.

They stretched nearly a mile, past apartment buildings and office towers where people occasionally stuck their heads out of windows to cheer.

Doni Curkendall, 17, ducked out of the march to grab some tacos at a makeshift tacqueria alongside the route.

Curkendall, who was born in Mexico City, said she was taking the day off school to support her immigrant family.

"I really care about my studies," she said. "We love it here. We don't want to leave, and we think we contribute a lot."

Curkendall said her family is in the country legally but that she feels as though they are discriminated against nonetheless. She said she was also standing up for relatives and friends who have been in the country illegally for years.

"I think the people who have been here for years deserve to get citizenship," Curkendall said. "They've been here for so long and contribute so much, it's not fair to send them back."

"Respect for both flags" The march draws support from those fed up with "racism" - and is keenly watched by elected officials.

Angelica Alvarez, an undocumented 17-year-old from Greeley, carried Mexican and American flags.

"I have respect for both flags," she said. "That's what you need - respect. I was born in Mexico but raised here. Immigrants just want to come here for a dream. We have to make a better life for everybody."

Rosaura Cruz believes her three children, ages 8, 7 and 5, will remember the march the rest of their lives. Cruz, an undocumented worker who came to Colorado nine years ago from Zacatecas, said "there is a lot of discrimination against" illegal immigrants.

Vicente Breceda took time off from his two restaurant jobs to march with his 13-year-old daughter, Cynthia.

The girl carried a sign that said "We are not criminals" and "Peace."

Other signs said, "We don't run the country, but we make the country run," "Today we march. Tomorrow we vote," and "No human being is illegal."

Some signs were bolder: "No papers. I speak English and pay taxes," "Anti Immigrant? Then swim back to Europe," and "Deport 12 million Republicans."

By some estimates, there are 12 million illegal immigrants in the U.S. and 275,000 in Colorado.

Marchers were overwhelmingly Latino, but there were others.

Bruce MacGregor, a Canadian who recently became an American citizen, said he came to protest the "racism going on in this country toward Latin Americans and South Americans."

Several legislators peered from the Capitol's second-floor windows as the crowd gathered.

"It's incredible to see - no matter where you are on this issue - to see this many people motivated to get out on the streets peacefully and make their opinions heard to the lawmakers of this nation," said Rep. Terrance Carroll, D-Denver.

Gov. Bill Owens said he appreciated the "peaceful and respectful" protest and that it was obvious the debate must continue.

The governor said the United States must secure its borders, implement a guest-worker program "that will match willing workers with responsible employers," and require those workers to pay taxes for health care and education.

Federal lawmakers are considering tightening border security, penalizing employers who hire illegal immigrants and establishing a guest-worker program.

A state group called Defend Colorado Now is circulating petitions for a November ballot initiative to bar illegal immigrants from receiving state services.

About 1,600 people attended a Mass in Aurora on Monday night that was arranged by the Archdiocese of Denver as an alternative to the walkout.

"The church fully supports the immigrants; they simply disagree with the strategy employed today," said Jamila Spencer, with the Colorado Catholic Conference.

Francisco Serratos, 31, from Denver, said he didn't attend Monday's rally because he's been at his new job for only two weeks and likes his boss.

"I think this is more powerful," Serratos said. "You are praying to God. He can help us."

Monday's protest was the largest of several immigration-rights rallies held in Denver in the past five weeks.

On April 19, a student-protest group estimated at 2,500 people turned out in a peaceful show of support for immigration reform.

An impromptu gathering on April 10 drew about 1,000 people, and on March 25, 50,000 people gathered in Civic Center for an event that police anticipated would draw a few thousand.

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