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Day-labor dispute simmers

Immigrants soliciting work seek center where they could avoid wrath of businesses on Thomas

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Long-simmering tensions over day laborers have ignited new clashes between business owners and activists in east Phoenix, worsening a situation that community leaders have had little success in resolving.

Business owners have hired off-duty police officers to drive day laborers off their properties. Leather-clad bikers, some hurling obscenities and insults, have been intimidating workers. And day-labor supporters are staging another rally Saturday to protest the use of police and highlight the need for a day-labor center.

On Thursday, day-laborer activist Salvador Reza and supporters called for a boycott of a furniture store that has hired off-duty police. Reza and members of other grass-roots groups have vowed to rally there each Saturday leading up to Christmas until the situation is resolved.

For years, there have been no solutions. However, *The Republic* on Thursday confirmed that activists and city officials are searching for property in the area where the workers could gather peacefully. Those involved in conversations declined comment.

The day-laborer dilemma is symptomatic of the federal government's failure to pass an immigration policy that would legally allow the workers to find work, city officials and activists said.

The nation's 117,600 day laborers and 63 hiring centers have come under fire from foes of illegal immigration who say the centers support illegal immigration.

In the Valley, work centers have been at the heart of a hostile battle over how cities should deal with undocumented workers. Non-profits and business owners don't want to attach themselves to controversial projects, fearing loss of funding and business. Last year, state lawmakers passed a law that prohibits cities from funding day-labor centers.

"The federal government has to act and the more anyone tries to solve isolated pieces of this problems, the more it takes the pressure off the federal government and the more it puts the pressure on state and local governments," Phoenix Mayor Phil Gordon said. "Short of that, this problem isn't going to get solved."

At the crack of dawn every day, dozens of men stand on sidewalks between 32nd and 40th streets, drawn to the area by the Home Depot at 36th Street and Thomas Road and demand for their work. Routinely, laborers are shoed off of the home-improvement store's property and spend the mornings shuffling from one street corner to another.

One recent morning, a dozen workers from Mexico, Honduras and El Salvador stood on a corner near a red and white sign saying "Do Not Pick Up Day Laborers." Ignoring the sign, employers hired the men.

"Wherever we go to look for work, (the police) ask us to leave," said Roberto Valdez, 36, from Mexico City. "If we go to another corner, they chase us along. They won't leave us in peace."

Business owners along the busy corridor are fed up. The day laborers have spread onto and near their properties, where workers heckle them, drive away business and spread litter. Roger Sensing, owner of M.D. Pruitt's Home Furnishings on Thomas Road and 34th Street, is frustrated to the point of tears.

Ongoing protests by day laborers, coupled with counterprotests by the anti-illegal-immigration motorcycle group American Freedom Riders and others, are threatening his business, he said.

"I could not come out on my front driveway, which is my own property, my whole life," said Sensing, who has been in business for 56 years. "I've been flipped off. I've been yelled at. We're just trying to make a living."

Ten months ago, Sensing organized about two-dozen area business owners to hire off-duty policemen to protect their properties, just like malls and other businesses regularly do.

In those 10 months, the officers have documented several incidents of day laborers soliciting work from the roadway; none of the cases led to prosecutions, police said.

Hispanic activists contend Phoenix police are allowing Sensing to set up a private patrol, using police. "He's now created a vigilante system up and down the corridor," said activist Alfredo Gutierrez, a Spanish-language radio-show host on Radio Campesina, KNAI-FM (88.3).

Phoenix police and officials said the off-duty police are acting within city policy.

Phoenix's only official center, the Macehualli Work Center at 16801 N. 25th St., opened in February 2003 to provide a safe place for neighborhood workers. The City Council agreed to set up the center and spent \$120,000 in public money to do so, igniting an ideological firestorm.

"(The city), they think they're damned if you do, damned if you don't," said Reza, of the

non-profit Tonatierra, which operates the Macehualli center. "I say we're damned if we do not find a solution."