

More than a million march in Los Angeles, other US cities in defense of immigrant rights

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In the largest demonstration in California's history, well over half a million people marched through downtown Los Angeles on Saturday, March 25, in defense of immigrant rights and to protest the government attacks on immigrants, especially undocumented workers.

The demonstration was the culmination of two weeks of protest demonstrations against new federal legislation, passed by the House of Representatives and scheduled to be taken up Monday by the US Senate, which would make illegal immigration a felony crime, as well as criminalizing all those who help illegal immigrants—including social service and charity workers who operate soup kitchens, homeless shelters and emergency clinics.

The scale of the demonstrations has staggered the political establishment in the United States, while going largely unreported by the American media. Not until the mammoth turnout in Los Angeles Saturday did the national television networks even report on the protests.

Another 50,000 people marched on Saturday in Denver, Colorado, in what was likely the largest demonstration in that city's history. Twenty thousand marched in Phoenix, Arizona, rallying outside the offices of US Senator Jon Kyl, who has introduced his own version of the punitive anti-immigrant legislation. It was the largest demonstration in the history of the state. Thousands more marched in cities as far-flung as Charlotte, North Carolina; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; and Sacramento, California. In the biggest such protest before Los Angeles, more than 100,000 immigrant workers and their supporters rallied in downtown Chicago on March 11.

According to organizers, the total number participating in the Los Angeles march may have exceeded 1 million. Throughout the day, thousands of new protesters joined the march, causing Spanish-language network UNIVISION to arrive at an estimate of 2 million. The demonstration was sponsored by CARECEN (Central American Resource Center), the Mexican American Political Association, the Catholic Church hierarchy and local groups in the Latin American and Asian-American communities.

So large was the Los Angeles demonstration that it took even the organizers by surprise, and the police, which had originally designated Broadway for the march, had to open adjacent streets to accommodate the endless stream of people, who then flooded adjacent Spring and Main Streets.

The spirited march, comprising in its overwhelming majority Hispanic and Latin American young working men and

women—auto mechanics, dry-wall installers, assemblers, construction workers, nurses, garage attendants, street cleaners, waiters, bus boys, parking lot attendants, maids, janitors; in fact representatives of Southern California's labor force—began at Olympic Boulevard and ended at City Hall 20 blocks away.

Among the signs that were prominently and repeatedly displayed by the marchers were, "Please, Let Us Be Part of Your Dreams," "We Are the Same, Ordinary People Like You," "We Are Not Criminals," "Amnesty and Full Rights For All Immigrants," "We are Not Criminals; We Are Students, Parents, and Neighbors," "I'm in My Homeland," "We Are Not the Enemy; We are Part of the Solution," "The United States: Land of Liberty, Land of Immigrants," "We Are All Immigrants in This Country," "Working Is Not a Crime," and "No to HR4437."

Along the march, the WSWs interviewed many workers.

Referring to HR3447, the anti-immigrant law before Congress, R.D., a young drywall finisher from Riverside County, said, "I am an undocumented worker. I came to this country to get a better life for myself and my family. This is supposed to be the land of freedom. I work very hard and I pay my taxes. I help the American economy. Why shouldn't I work here? I am part of America. Everybody at work lives in fear. Is that the way it's supposed to be here? And now, with this new law they are proposing it's going to be worse. That's why I am here today. I never imagined I'd be marching for freedom in the United States."

HR3447 was one of the main targets of the protest. It is also known as the Sensenbrenner-King Bill, which the House of Representatives passed last December under the main sponsorship of Wisconsin Republican James Sensenbrenner. Not only would it crack down on employers and businesses that hire undocumented immigrants, but it would also make anyone who assists them, or anyone who enters this country illegally, a felon. It would also expand enforcement of the law all along the border between the United and Mexico, which means erecting a fence 700 miles long.

While the bill had the support of the House Republican leadership, both the Senate Republican leadership and the Bush administration have expressed reservations, based on two concerns: objections from business interests that need immigrant workers to keep operating; and fears of a backlash at the polls from Latino and Asian voters, especially in states like California, Texas and Florida, which have large immigrant populations.

A bipartisan bill sponsored by Democrat Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts and Republican John McCain of Arizona has

attracted the most Democratic Party support, as well as some Republicans, and it has features favored by the Bush administration, including a temporary guest worker program, which would turn millions of immigrants into a short-term, easily exploited labor force.

No big-business politician in either party supports the democratic right of immigrant workers to live and work in the country of their choice. All of them proclaim the need to “defend our borders,” as though the United States were being invaded by a hostile army, in order to appeal to right-wing anti-immigrant sentiment. At the same time, they seek to reconcile such appeals with the need of big business to maintain access to cheap labor.

The disputes among the Republicans and Democrats, which do not break clearly along party lines, involve different estimates of how far it is practical to go in harassing and deporting undocumented workers. The McCain-Kennedy bill would allow employers to sponsor workers for permanent immigrant status. Those undocumented workers already in the country would be able to become immigrants and citizens after an undetermined number of years, provided they pay a fine, meet certain work requirements and learn to speak English.

Senator Arlen Specter, chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, is crafting a compromise bill that would require participants in a guest worker program to leave the United States after six years. They would have to remain in their country of origin for one year before being allowed back into the United States. This is closer to the position of the White House, but still evokes some opposition from employer groups fearful of the disruptive effect of such a turnover in their labor force.

California’s senior Democrat, Senator Dianne Feinstein, has sought to satisfy both the right-wing law-and-order demagogues and the agribusiness interests. She denounced allegedly lax enforcement of immigration laws, saying, “We have tens of thousands of criminal aliens freely walking the streets of our communities because instead of being deported to their communities after serving time, they are simply released back into their communities to commit more crimes.” At the same time she insisted that any new legislation include an exception for farm workers because California’s economy, the world’s sixth largest, “would collapse” without such an exception.

Sections of the Republican right wing see immigrant bashing as the next “wedge issue” to be exploited in the 2006 elections. One Republican congressman, Tom Tancredo of Colorado, is exploring a possible presidential campaign on that basis. State legislatures in several states have introduced bills that would allow immigrants to be arrested for trespassing—making immigration a state rather than a federal matter—or making it illegal for undocumented workers to buy homes, receive health services or send their children to school.

The marchers in Los Angeles who spoke with the WSWS rejected the perspective that immigrants should be treated as criminals. A 28-year-old truck mechanic from San Bernardino said that “the law is racist, especially directed against Mexicans more than anyone else. It will criminalize the people that cross the border into the United States, as well as the people who help them. It will also punish the employers with jail. The law still hasn’t finalized the details, but generally it will punish people who come

here illegally.

“Right now at work there is an atmosphere of fear begun to take place because of everything that is happening, because of the anti-immigrant wave that’s happening in the United States.”

One 26-year-old immigrant, from Michoacán, Mexico, has been in this country legally for six years. He told the WSWS, “I work at a chemical plant. I am a machine operator, in charge of the maintenance of the machines. In the summer I work up to 60 hours. I make 15 dollars an hour. After six years, that’s nothing. The atmosphere at work is very good. My boss is a good woman. She really appreciates the Hispanic community.

“We have had no immigration raids. We are fine. But I am here today because I want to show my support to people. Maybe I am a little bit better off, but we are all together in this. If we don’t unite, we are not going to get anything. Some of us may be better off, but if we don’t help the less fortunate, what’s going to happen to them? We have to think about other people besides ourselves. That’s why I am here. I look out for my own welfare, as well as the welfare of those around me.

“It’s difficult to say if the Democratic Party will help us. Like with all politicians, on election eve, they show a different face. They say so many things, that they are going to help you, but when they reach power, they become totally different and they flee.

“I think that my message to the rest of the American workers is: accept us, and to see us their brothers, because we are all workers. We can do everything they can do. In fact, we are not afraid to do the work they refuse to do. I think we are all equal. We have the same aptitudes and abilities. All we need is an opportunity.”

The political perspective revealed by the march organizers is to keep this massive response by immigrant workers to attacks on their civil and political rights within the confines of the Democratic Party and of protest politics. The list of speakers at City Hall included LA Mayor Antonio Villarraigosa and other Latino Democrats.

Only the Socialist Equality Party, however, unconditionally defends the rights of immigrant workers, regardless of their legal status, and fights to unite American workers with their class brothers and sisters in Latin America, Asia and throughout the world in a common struggle against the profit system.



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