

Thousands of students walk out of schools in Southern California to protest anti-immigration legislation

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On the heels of the massive march in Los Angeles last Saturday to defend the rights of immigrants, some 40,000 high school students walked out of classes throughout southern California Monday to protest legislation pending in Congress that would criminalize undocumented workers and those who aid them. The walkout continued on Tuesday.

In the Los Angeles school district alone, 52 middle and high schools were affected by the walkout of almost 25,000 students. According to several news sources, the protests and marches that began in Los Angeles's mammoth school district, second largest in the nation, spread quickly to other nearby counties, including Orange, Riverside and San Bernardino.

Though the marches were mostly peaceful, traffic came to a brief halt on some of Los Angeles's main arteries, such as the Hollywood and Harbor Freeways that cut through downtown. The student marches that followed the spontaneous walkouts also disrupted traffic along well-known streets such as Sunset Boulevard, Melrose Avenue and Laurel Canyon Boulevard.

A 4,000-strong march and demonstration in the San Fernando Valley section of the city began at the government headquarters in the Van Nuys district and marched for about a mile and a half to the Panorama City mall.

On Tuesday in Los Angeles, despite heavy rains, approximately 8,800 high school students left their classrooms to protest. At a meeting with student leaders and demonstrators, Antonio Villaraigosa, the Hispanic mayor of LA, was booed when he called upon students to return to school.

According to participants, the reception the marches

and demonstrations received along the way was overwhelming, with most motorists honking their support. The protests even included Pacific Palisades, one of the wealthiest and most exclusive enclaves in Los Angeles.

The spontaneous demonstrations, loosely organized as they were, were far larger than those that took place in 1994 against Proposition 187, the state law (later overturned by the courts) established by referendum, which denied undocumented workers social services, healthcare and public education, and even the famous student walkout for Chicano rights and against the Vietnam War in 1968.

City Hall in downtown—the same place that had served as the culmination of the 1,000,000-strong march two days before—saw the gathering at noon of thousands of young people.

Though the demonstrations were mostly peaceful, there were a few arrests. In the city of Escondido, in San Diego County, police arrested about 25 people when they refused to disperse. Riot-equipped police in Riverside arrested six young people and one adult after scuffles. And in Van Nuys, in Los Angeles County, four people were arrested.

At Fairfax High School, near the Hollywood district of Los Angeles, the atmosphere was decidedly different and more ominous, as hundreds of students protesting HR 4437, the anti-immigration bill passed by the House of Representatives, confronted dozens of police in riot gear who kept the trunks of their cars open, apparently to have easy access to their weapons. Police cars blocked access to the area, and three helicopters circled above.

A group of about 200 students gathered away from

the police, jumped over a fence and began a walking demonstration along Melrose Avenue going east.

According to the students who spoke to the WSWS, the spontaneous demonstration took place to express their indignation at the anti-immigration measure. It was organized by the students themselves through emails, fliers, instant messages, cell phones, beepers and postings on myspace.com web pages. In many instances, school staff also abandoned the schools and joined the students in the demonstrations.

When the WSWS asked one of the students if the demonstration was mostly Latino, he said, "We're getting support from non-Latinos. It is Hispanic-based, but non-Hispanic students have not objected."

On Tuesday, the WSWS went back to the school and asked one of the students about the changes in the immigration law that had taken place on Monday, apparently because Congress had retreated in the face of the demonstrations that had taken place throughout the country.

"Well, now it's supposed not to criminalize people who help people who enter the country illegally, but from what I understand, it still punishes those who are here illegally. And that's not fair. Let me ask you this: did anybody ask the United States to go into Iraq and kill thousands of people? Isn't the United States government an illegal alien force in that country? Who the hell asked the United States to go into Iraq? Who asked Bush?"

"Do you see illegal aliens from Latin America killing thousands of people in this country? No, most of them kill themselves working for this country, like my parents, who came from Jalisco [Mexico] 20 years ago. They are good working people who respect the law.

"Besides, let me tell you one thing. It's just an accident, a geographical accident that they were born south of the border. What difference does it make where they were born?"

More student protests and walkouts have been announced, but some school officials, who stand to see their budgets cut due to student absenteeism, have announced that schools will be "on lockdown" over the next few days. That means that once students enter schools, they will not be allowed to leave.

In addition, LA Police Chief William Bratton has announced that the police will begin detaining students for truancy, with punishments in the form of large fines

and up to 20 days of community service.

For some officials, however, converting the schools into prisons is apparently not enough. Students will not even be permitted to move from class to class, and will be punished with enforced attendance and Saturday school.



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