

US: Over a million protest against anti-immigrant legislation

A WSWWS reporting team
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Well over a million immigrant workers and their supporters joined marches and rallies in cities from coast to coast beginning Sunday and continuing Monday to protest against reactionary legislation approved by one house of Congress that would treat undocumented workers in the US—as well as anyone who provides them with aid or support—as criminal felons.

On Sunday, an estimated half a million people filled the streets of Dallas, Texas, one of the largest rallies in the country. Hundreds of thousands also took to the streets Monday in New York City, where demonstrators filled the pavement from City Hall to Canal Street, some 15 city blocks, while in Washington, hundreds of thousands more packed the Mall facing the US Capitol Building.

Demonstrations took place in well over 100 other cities and towns, including massive turnouts in cities like Houston, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, Phoenix and Atlanta. In this last city, the turnout was fed by anger over state legislation about to be signed by Gov. Sonny Perdue that would deny all basic state-administered services to immigrants who fail to prove they are in the country legally.

Smaller towns, meanwhile, saw unprecedented crowds taking to the streets. For example, in Garden City, Kansas, a farming community of 30,000 in the southwest of the state, more than 3,000 people demonstrated.

Throughout the country, the mood at the demonstrations was one of anger and defiance against a political establishment that has attempted to whip up anti-immigrant sentiment as a means of diverting increasing social tensions over declining living standards and attacks on basic social conditions.

The crowds were overwhelmingly working class, with many having walked off jobs or skipped work in order to attend. Throughout the country, businesses dependent upon immigrant labor were forced to shut down, including meatpacking plants, construction sites and large sections of the service industry.

Organizers of the demonstrations had initially been prepared to hail the Senate's anticipated approval of a less punitive piece of legislation than that passed by the House, which would have provided a process for those undocumented immigrant workers who have been in the country for more than five years to legalize their status, on the condition that they work for another six years, pay fines and meet other requirements. Millions of other workers, however, would have been required under the Senate legislation to leave the country.

Even this bill, however, was quashed last Friday by an attempt to

attach numerous anti-immigrant amendments advanced by Republican Senators opposed to providing any means of legalizing undocumented workers. After the bill failed to pass, the Congress began its two-week spring break, and it is not anticipated that it will push through a new piece of legislation after it returns.

In Washington Monday, President Bush declared lamely that the mass protests showed that immigration was “an important issue that people feel strongly about.” At the same time, however, he bowed to the right-wing base of his party, declaring that undocumented workers already in the US should be allowed to remain only on a “temporary basis” and, if they want to stay, should have to “get in line, like everybody else; not at the head of the line, but at the end of the line.”

At many of the rallies, including the one in Washington, Democratic politicians spoke to the crowds, proclaiming their support for the immigrants' cause. Those like Massachusetts Senator Ted Kennedy, however, did not explain how they came to support a Senate “compromise” bill that provided for the outright deportation of up to two million immigrants who have come to the country since the beginning of 2004, while forcing millions more with between three and five years in the US to leave the country and return only as temporary workers.

Among the politicians brought before the crowd in New York City was New York State Attorney General Eliot Spitzer, the Democratic candidate for governor, and the state's Democratic Senator Hillary Clinton, who three years ago declared herself “adamantly against illegal immigrants” and called for the issuance of a national ID card to better repress the immigrant population.

The presence on the rallies' platforms of these political representatives of a ruling elite that is determined to maintain laws that keep immigrant workers as a source of cheap and repressed labor was indicative of the desperate need for a new political perspective to unite immigrant and native-born workers in a common struggle against the policies of the government and the profit interests that they serve.

In New York City, where well over 40 percent of the population is foreign born, the demonstration brought out huge throngs, including large numbers of Latin American, Asian, African, Irish and other immigrant workers. Many carried home-made placards bearing slogans in English, Spanish, Chinese and other languages that included, “We are not criminals, we are workers,” “We are all immigrants, just like the pilgrims,” “Don't bite the hand that feeds you,” and “Give me your tired, your poor.”

The large crowds that squeezed between police barricades lining Broadway were only part of the sea of humanity that swept through lower Manhattan for the protest. Contingents of would-be protesters, including entire families who came for the occasion, marched up and down neighboring streets seeking an entry point into the rally, past cross streets barricaded by the New York City Police Department.

Among those walking up Church Street, trying to find a way to join the rally on Broadway, was Guillermo Peña, an immigrant from the Mexican state of Puebla, who has been in the country for nine years, working as a cook in a Manhattan restaurant.

“I work hard, and I pay taxes,” he told the WSWS. “What Congress has done is wrong. They want to hunt us down like we are criminals. We are not criminals and we are not terrorists; we are only workers.”

Guillermo said that the proposals put forward both by the House and the Senate were unacceptable. “The idea of giving people temporary status is never going to work,” he said. “You’re going to have them work here and then make them leave? No one is going to turn themselves in for that. We need permanent status.”

He said that he had come to New York City from his native land because of impossible economic conditions. “There is a lot of poverty there,” he said. “People have come here to work to be able to send money home to support their families. Like everybody else, I send money home.”

He added that conditions have become more impossible in Puebla since the imposition of the North American Free Trade Agreement between the US, Canada and Mexico. “Since the free trade agreement, things have gotten worse for people working the land,” said Guillermo. “You have to have money to invest in order to compete, and the small guy just can’t do it. Most people live off of agriculture in Puebla, and the result is there is no other way except to leave.”

Gavin Bradley, who came to the US from Ireland eight years ago, participated in the rally with a large group of other Irish immigrants wearing t-shirts bearing the slogan, “Legalize the Irish.” He is currently working as a bartender.

“What they have done in Congress affects all of us greatly,” he said. “It is really coming down to a make or break situation. If nothing happens to change this, a lot of us are going to start moving home. I don’t want to do that, because I love this country; I have friends here, and it’s sunny a lot of the time.

“We have gone down to DC, made phone calls to Congressmen and everything we could think of. I know that this is a government of the rich. But when these rich people go into a nice restaurant and spend thirty bucks on a steak, who do they think is down in the basement cooking it?”

“They try to portray the people who are here as undocumented workers as all Mexican, but we are from everywhere,” Gavin added. “You go to any construction site in New York and you’ll find Irish, Polish and Mexican working side by side. I was watching the news on these so-called Minutemen guarding the Mexican border against immigrants, and by their names, two of them were Irishmen. Do they have any idea what the Irish here are facing?”

Doudou, from Senegal, who has been in the US for seven years,

told the WSWS: “I came to the rally because the government’s polices are unfair. I think this protest can change things,” His friend Oumar, from Mauritania, who has lived in the US for eight years, added: “I came to demonstrate against Bush because I think the rules they want to put on us are not fair. The laws are not good for immigrants. They want cheap labor.”

Anthony, from St. Vincent in the Caribbean, explained to the WSWS, “I heard about this rally on the radio and took a day off to come. There are a lot of people here and the government has to listen. It’s hard for immigrants. In construction, sometimes the boss doesn’t give you a pay stub, even after you’ve filled out a W2-form. This goes on a lot in construction. You have to spend a lot of money and hire a lawyer just to get what’s owed to you. It’s the same thing with apartments. I paid a woman a down payment in cash and she just took the money. I got an eviction notice the next month. Right now I think that immigrant people should have amnesty. If Bush can send people to war, he can change this. We need freedom.”

Orton Ramierez, a student at City Tech College, was born in Mexico and has lived in the US for 14 years. “The law needs to change. I’m about to graduate, but I can’t even buy a car. I’ll have a degree in applied math and science, but because of my immigration status, I won’t be able to put my skills to use. You live here, grow up here in America, but you are left out. I think this demonstration is going to make a difference. I hope that it will affect the community in general. I’ve never been to a demonstration before, and seeing this unity is going to motivate me.

His brother Edgar, also a student at City Tech, said: “We want to be able to work. You adapt a culture to have a better life, you have a dream, but the law keeps you different from other people. We come from a poor country and we want to have what other people have. They’re trying to get rid of that dream.”

Oscar Guevara, a cookie salesman who works in New York City and Long Island, was with a small group holding banners that said, “We are not the enemy. We are workers.” He explained, “We want to let the government know we are not the enemy, or criminals like they want us to look. Most people here are workers. We just want to be part of this country. With this movement, at last people will have power. Did you know that even in Iraq people are fighting with illegal papers? Illegal people were working in the World Trade Center on 9/11. They don’t want people to be human even though this country said in the beginning that we all have human rights.”



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