

US: Millions of immigrant workers join May 1st “boycott”

A WSWS reporting team
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Masses of immigrant workers took to the streets of US cities from coast-to-coast again in support of a May 1st boycott of work and stores to oppose reactionary legislation seeking to criminalize immigrants and to demand basic democratic and social rights.

The nationwide protest movement—dubbed “a day without immigrants”—shut down stores, meatpacking plants, restaurants, construction sites and other businesses and halted work in the fields in many agricultural areas.

Slogans such as “we are not terrorists or criminals, we are workers” were widespread on many of the marches.

While in some areas, the turnout was reportedly lighter because of fears generated by recent factory raids conducted by immigration agents, in a number of major cities—Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston, Denver—massive crowds, in some cases ranging in the hundreds of thousands, demonstrated. The protests were conducted in defiance of warnings by President George Bush and other politicians—as well as by some leaders of Hispanic lobbying groups—against the boycott.

The protests were characterized by militancy and determination to fight for full citizenship rights for all. Many of those present denounced the efforts of politicians to use immigrant workers as scapegoats. However, the various Democratic politicians, church officials and union bureaucrats who spoke from the official platforms offered no way forward to defeat the anti-immigrant measures being prepared in Washington. On the contrary they sought to boost illusions in the false perspective of pressuring the Democrats to defend immigrant rights.

In not a few cases, employers lent at least tacit support to the movement, agreeing to shut down operations for the day. Tyson Foods, the world’s largest meat producer, for example, closed five of its nine beef plants and four of its six pork plants. Eight out of 14 Perdue chicken plants also shut down. Gallo Wines in Sonoma, California gave its workers the day off. And in a number of areas, supermarkets, restaurants and retail stores closed their doors.

Clearly, a significant section of both big and small business is seeking some means of regularizing the status of their work force. The American Chamber of Commerce has been one of the strongest lobbies for Congress to pass some form of immigration reform. The threat of a police-state style crackdown against undocumented workers—not to mention threats of legal sanctions against employers for hiring them—are seen by large sections of America’s ruling elite as a disruption of profit-making enterprises dependent on cheap immigrant labor.

At the same time, however, substantial elements of the Republican Party as well as some Democrats have attempted to whip up anti-immigrant sentiments as a means of dividing the working class and diverting popular anger over declining living standards and deteriorating conditions of life for immigrant and native-born workers alike.

It is this political contradiction that has thus far made it impossible for the Congress as a whole to pass immigration reform legislation. The only measure to be approved thus far is the “border security” bill passed in the

House of Representatives, which would turn tens of millions of undocumented workers into criminal felons, while walling off the border with Mexico.

It was the passage of this reactionary legislation last December that sparked popular outrage among immigrant workers, unleashing a series of mass demonstrations across the country.

Attempts by the Senate to bring a less punitive immigration package to a vote failed earlier this month. The measure, which still would have forced millions of more recent immigrants to leave the country, while providing a protracted process for those with more than five years in the US to legalize their status, was scuttled by Republican Senators seeking to attach a long series of anti-immigrant amendments.

The Bush White House has cautiously indicated its support for another attempt at passing the Senate version, including a “guest worker” program that would create another layer of second-class workers in the US. At the same time, however, it has sought to appease the Republican Party’s right-wing xenophobic base by engaging in anti-immigrant demagoguery. This reached ludicrous proportions last week with Bush’s issuing a public condemnation of a group of Latino recording artists for putting Spanish words to the National Anthem, insisting that the “Star-spangled Banner” can only be sung in English.

Senator Lamar Alexander, a Republican from Tennessee, went even further, vowing to introduce a Senate resolution this week defending the English-only anthem.

Others on the Republican right have worked to stoke up vehement anti-immigrant sentiments. Right-wing television commentator and former White House aide Pat Buchanan, for example, went on the air to denounce immigration as an “invasion” and to declare that those participating in the demonstrations were “engaged in a massive act of extortion.” He predicted “a tremendous backlash among the American people.”

And members of the anti-immigrant vigilante group, the Minutemen, staged a counter-demonstration of sorts by erecting a six-foot, barbed-wire fence along a stretch of California’s border with Mexico. The group, whose armed members hunt immigrants crossing the border, has demanded that Washington seal it off.

In **Los Angeles** a crowd of well over half a million demonstrated. With a large portion of the city’s workforce made up of undocumented immigrants, much of the local economy ground to a halt, not only with stores and restaurants closing, but with trucking largely shut down at the docks and major wholesale food markets. Federal courts also shut down out of concern that the number of people in the area would paralyze traffic.

Demonstrations started at noon and lasted well into the evening, with protesters pouring into MacArthur Park. The overwhelming majority of those who participated in the Los Angeles demonstration were immigrant workers from Mexico and Central and South America.

Several of those who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* voiced support for full amnesty for all undocumented workers, a position that has

been rejected by both the Democrats and the Republicans. Trini, a worker from Mexico in her 30s, said she was for “legalization for everyone, everywhere. All immigrants should be legalized,” she said. “We are not criminals.”

Orlando, a young worker from El Salvador, said that the demonstrations were necessary “as part of a movement for civil rights. It is part of the American dream,” he said, “the right to work and live with our families.” He said that he thought racist sentiments lay behind the bill passed by the House of Representatives. They are “blaming immigrants for economic problems. We are tired of being scapegoats.”

“We are all Americans, in North America, Central America and South America.” Edwin, his father, said. He also noted that El Salvador has troops in Iraq, and said he was very much opposed to this.

Jose said, “We are here for the dignity and respect of everyone.” He also voiced support for amnesty for all “aliens,” many of whom have been in the US for two decades.

In **Chicago**, the number of demonstrators was also estimated at more than half a million, with a huge crowd marching through the city’s financial district chanting “Si se puede”—“yes we can”—as the crowd made its way from Union Park to Grant Park.

Denver, meanwhile, saw the largest demonstration in Colorado’s history, with crowds swelled in part by anger over the introduction of new anti-immigrant legislation that would deny all basic state services to the undocumented.

In **New York City**, tens of thousands of people filled Union Square in Lower Manhattan, historically the center of working class demonstrations and protests dating back to the early part of the last century.

The majority present was from Latin America, with Mexicans having the largest representation at the rally, but there were also large numbers of South Asians, Africans and working people from every part of the globe. Accompanying the immigrants were college and high school students, nurses dressed in their uniforms and other sections of workers. Among the immigrants there were many employees of restaurants, supermarkets, stores, hotels, and building contractors who had taken the day off.

Virginia Ramirez, a member of the International Mexican Association at LaGuardia Community College in New York’s borough of Queens told the WWS: “I am a student and work as a bartender. We are not criminals. We want the same dream as any American worker. They attack immigrants to make us scapegoats. They want to divert attention from the war in Iraq and also from Katrina. Why now? We have been here for a very long time.

“In Mexico the situation is very bad. If we are deported we will not be able to find a job in Mexico. Since NAFTA the economy has suffered. There are more Mexicans coming to the US today than before NAFTA was signed.”

Rajani Adhiaary, a CUNY student from Nepal said: “I am here with other restaurant workers to denounce the attacks against immigrants. This is the same fight as the fight against cuts in wages. The US supports dictatorial regimes in the Philippines and Nepal. In Nepal the fight against the Maoist guerrillas has intensified since the US start giving money to the king. The killing of people has gone up.”

Leonora Barreto from the state of Morelos in Mexico told the WWS: “I came here with my daughter because this is her fight too. Bush is doing war and killing many children, women and men. We have the right to be here because the land belongs to everybody, not a single man. My daughter and I have to do something to protect the planet because the governments are destroying it.”

Dan Cummings, from Rochester Institute of Technology in Rochester, New York was one of a substantial number of students attending the rally. He told the WWS: “I have come here because everyone deserves to be equal. Everyone immigrated to this country at some point. The Democrats and Republicans do not support this kind of equality.

Ben, a student from City College in New York said: “I am here to show solidarity with these guys. I believe that our neighbors to the south are a little more important than cheap labor. They’re part of the fabric of the city. I want us to show that the general population in America agrees with immigrant rights. We are showing the world that the entire country is not on the side of the crazy Minutemen on the Arizona border.”

In **Detroit** more than a thousand people marched and rallied in the city’s largely Hispanic south west side neighborhood. Along the march route dozens of restaurants, laundromats and other small businesses were closed in support of the day of protest. Protesters carried signs declaring, “I am not a criminal,” “We are Americans” and one featuring the photos of two Mexicans immigrants sent to Iraq by the US military.

Several protesters who spoke with the WWS expressed their outrage at both political parties and their efforts to vilify immigrants and restrict their rights. “Bush has done nothing good for this country,” one teenage protester said. “America is not supposed to be for the rich but for everybody. Working people come from all countries and everyone should have a right for a decent future.”

Her friend added, “We shouldn’t be called ‘illegal aliens.’ We’re people, working people, not criminals. Immigrants are working under sad conditions and making less than the minimum wage just to bring home food for their families. It’s not right.”

At a construction site along the march route workers stopped to express their support for the protesters. A former Chrysler autoworker said, “Bush is full of bull. It’s not the immigrants taking away jobs and social services it’s the wealthy. We can see through that. There should be equal opportunity for everyone all throughout the world.”

A native-born childcare worker who attended the rally said, “People are supposed to be free in America. But if you are poor in this country—no matter what your nationality—you don’t have the same opportunities as the rich. People should have the right to work and live wherever they want. Bush used the ‘guest worker’ proposal to win Hispanic votes in the election but once the voting was over he turned against them. They are trying to take away their rights while sending immigrants to Iraq to die for nothing.”

Her co-worker added, “I think they are trying to turn working people against each other to hide the real reason for the elimination of jobs and services. The rich and powerful act like puppeteers and try to trick workers into fighting one another. The Democrats are no different from the Republicans. They say they are for the working people but they are not.”

In **Atlanta**, around 3,000 people demonstrated in front of the State Capitol at midday. The crowd consisted largely of younger immigrant workers, many of them accompanied by their families including young children. The intimidation tactics of the government were quite visible with the deployment of armed and mounted police in a variety of uniforms, including sharpshooters on the roofs, who stood out against the backdrop of a blue, sunny sky. However, the rally, which lasted a few hours, went ahead without incident.

There were several elementary school teachers who had taken the day off to show support for immigrants. Courtney Pace, holding a banner with the words “Educators for Immigrants”, felt strongly about the issue of immigrant rights. “The US is a melting pot and a nation of immigrants,” she said. “The government should treat immigrants with dignity, instead of trying to criminalize them. They are human beings like everyone else.”

Alfredo Diaz said he had come to the rally to stand up for his rights. He works in Atlanta as a painter, despite having graduated with a degree in archeology from Atemajac University in Mexico. He said he migrated to the US as he could not find a job in Mexico and said that he helps his family back in Mexico.

Within the last decade the Atlanta area has experienced an explosive growth of immigrants from all over of the world. However the influx of

people from Central America, China and Vietnam is especially pronounced.

In April, the Georgia government headed by Governor Sonny Purdue, despite giving hypocritical lip service to “diversity,” signed a reactionary piece of legislation into law. Georgia Senate Bill 529 penalizes both the employers who hire illegal immigrant and the migrant workers. However, this bill faces legal challenges, as immigration law is the purview of federal government, rather than individual states.



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