

Hundreds of thousands march across US for immigrant rights

A WSWS reporting team
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Hundreds of thousands of immigrant workers and their supporters took part in marches and protests in Los Angeles, New York, Phoenix, Chicago, Denver, Detroit and other major cities across the United States on May 1 to protest the growing number of raids and deportations and to press for basic democratic rights. The actions included demonstrations, consumer boycotts and school walkouts.

This year's protests were smaller than a similar immigrant "boycott" that took place last May Day in which millions of workers participated. This was due in part to stepped-up harassment and intimidation of immigrant workers by federal authorities. Also, in 2006, masses of people were spurred to action by a piece of legislation in Congress that would have turned undocumented immigrants—as well as anyone who rendered them assistance—into criminals.

In the past year, the US government deported 221,664 undocumented workers, 37,000 more than the previous year, an increase of 20 percent.

In a crackdown called Operation Return to Sender, US immigration officials have arrested more than 23,000 people nationwide. While supposedly targeting felons, most of those caught up in the sweeps have no criminal records. Immigration officers have not only targeted workplaces, but they have raided private homes without warrants and even rounded up people off the streets. In Chicago, immigration police with assault rifles reportedly closed off a mall parking lot in a Latino neighborhood and began asking everyone for papers, hauling off those without proper documents.

In many cases, the deportations have resulted in the splitting of families, with US-born children separated from their parents. The raids have been so provocative that local officials in a number of cities have issued protests.

The escalating repression is aimed at terrorizing immigrants, who are being scapegoated for the falling living standards and job insecurity facing millions of working people. At the same time, while seeking to channel anger over the failures of the profit system into anti-immigrant sentiments, the dominant sections of big business want to ensure continued access to the cheap supply of labor provided by undocumented workers.

A conflict between those right-wing Republicans in Congress who favor the mass roundup and deportation of undocumented immigrants and the Bush administration, which favors a slightly less draconian approach, has prevented the enactment of new

legislation for the past year.

The legislation supported by Bush is harshly punitive. It calls for increasing the number of immigration police and requiring undocumented workers seeking permanent residency to endure long waiting periods and pay hefty fines. The guest workers program contained in the bill endorsed by Bush recalls the infamous Bracero program. It is designed to put workers completely at the mercy of corporate employers while stripping them of the few rights they currently enjoy.

As part of its crackdown on immigration, the government is contracting for the building of privately run detention centers along the US-Mexican border.

The liberal and church groups sponsoring the May 1 protests have sought to orient their protests to pressuring the Democratic Party, depicting the dispute in Congress over immigration as that between reform and anti-reform factions. In fact, the Democrats and Republicans are united in their hostility to granting basic democratic rights to immigrant workers.

Typical is the position of Senator Hillary Clinton. When asked her opinion on granting amnesty to undocumented workers at the recent debate between contenders for the Democratic presidential nomination, she replied, "Well, I'm in favor of comprehensive immigration reform, which includes tightening our border security, sanctioning employers of undocumented immigrants, helping our communities deal with the costs that come from illegal immigration.... After 9/11 we've got to know who's in this country. And then give them a chance to pay a fine, pay back taxes, learn English and stand in line to be eligible for a legal status in this country."

Among the tens of thousands who joined the march through downtown Los Angeles were many young people, including students from Roosevelt High and Wilson High Schools in East Los Angeles as well a large number of workers.

Quiroz, an immigrant construction worker who has won legal status in the US, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "When I compare my own experience with recent immigrants, it is like night and day. Immigrants today live in fear; they can be taken at any time. When they try to find work, they have to produce documents. Everyone hopes for an amnesty. There is a rumor that if there is a guest worker program like Bush wants, there will be a \$10,000 fee for immigrants to become legal. That will be beyond the reach of most immigrants. "It does not make sense for workers to be divided on this issue. Immigrant and US workers work in the

same jobs, shoulder to shoulder.”

Jessica, a 20-year-old garment worker, told the WSWWS, “I am angry because I think that the government must stop threatening people and carrying out raids in factories or against immigrants, like the one in that Chicago shopping center a few days ago. People live in fear, and are often afraid to leave their homes to go shopping and to go to school.”

Leyla and Claudio, who came to the United States 20 years ago, fleeing the civil war in El Salvador, also marched. “We saw terrible things and fled our country with little more than our lives,” said Claudio. “I reject the demand for guest workers; there must be a generalized legalization.”

Leyla added, “Conditions for immigrants are scandalous. Like us, many immigrants are part of the so-called informal economy because getting a job is difficult. We peddle things in the street. Undocumented immigrants suffer a lot of unemployment.”

Francisco, a young construction worker who has been in the US for 11 years, told the WSWWS “, There has been an increase in raids, in Ontario, in Orange County and in the fields. That has to stop. People are afraid that they will be separated from their families. My deepest hope is that all immigrants will be legalized. However, I don’t think that this will happen; we have a long struggle ahead.

“I came from Guatemala. There are few jobs, and many people are forced to come to the United States. It is an arduous trip that can take weeks, months sometimes. More and more, the Mexican police tries to interfere with the immigrants from Central America.”

Concepción, 55, is a garment worker and a Mexican Indian from Veracruz Province. She told the WSWWS that her cousin is being deported in three weeks. “She has a 14-year-old son who was born here,” she said. “She pleaded with the immigration people to let her stay. It was no use. Her son had broken his leg, and ICE allowed her to stay until the cast came off. Now they told her she has to leave because her child can get therapy in Mexico.

“If people get deported, there will be more families split up. The children will suffer most. I came from Mexico 20 years ago and became a garment worker. It is hard in the factories because the boss is constantly trying to cut costs by firing the workers with seniority and hiring new sewing machine operators at a lower wage, below minimum wage. Workers do not get more for working overtime. A lot of us become independent. We pick up cloth and sew it at home. I make tablecloths. “

Thousands also joined a march in Detroit that began in Patton Park. Among them was Carlos, who told the WSWWS, “If you look at it, every person in this country is from another country, except the Native Americans. If it is not you, it is your parents or your grandparents. I don’t understand why some people are not for the immigrants in this country. It is bad. Families are being separated from each other. There is a family in San Diego with three children, all under 18 years old, and their mother and father were deported and sent to Mexico. I think the children were 16, 13 and 10. It reminds me of the time they took the Cuban boy and would not return him to his father. These people, say they are for families and rights, but there they did not care for the family at all.”

Patricia Palmino, also on the Detroit march, condemned the

growing deportations of immigrants. “These are workers who are here to work, not to take someone’s job. They are here just to make a better life. You know that many of the Mexican workers work very hard and they do jobs other people do not want to do. Yet they receive much less money. Now, there is a new policy that if you are an undocumented, you can’t go to university. I believe you should have the right to go.

“I have a sister-in-law who has a son that did not have a Social Security number. He was only nine years old and needed to go to school, but they would not let him in the school. His dad went to the Mexican consul and did all kinds of things, and finally they got him a PIN number. A nine-year-old kid should be in school, whether they have a PIN number or not. The children are our future.”

Mindy Melete Lares, who is Puerto Rican, said she came to the march in Detroit to support immigrant rights. “I am opposed to what this government is doing. Bush, I think he is a direct descendent of the Nazis. He doesn’t care. I came here 50 years ago. When I came, they were looking for more workers and brought immigrants into the country. Now, look at how they treat immigrants.”

Ramon Antonio, who came to the march with his young daughter, told the WSWWS, “I work two jobs to make ends meet. I am doing this for my kids. There is nothing in Mexico for decent jobs. That’s why we are here.”

George and Carlos are middle-school students who attended the march and rally. Both of them said most of their friends did not go to school today in order to attend the rally.

George said, “I think it is not right to send all the immigrants back. I believe they should have rights just like everyone here. They work and pay taxes like everyone. I think they should be treated the same.

Carlos agreed: “I think we should have the right to stay. I have been here since I was nine years old.”

One of the largest demonstrations in the country took place in Chicago, where hundreds of thousands marched through downtown to Grant Park.

Abundio Ramirez, a practicing immigration lawyer in Chicago for the last four years, said that he had joined the march to support his clients.

“They’re not here for amnesty,” he said. “There’s a lot of anger about IRAIRA [Illegal Immigration and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996], which brought reinstatement and a 10-year permanent bar. This destroys families. There’s a build-up of anger and frustration, and they are here to change policy. It’s like Prohibition in the 1920s. The moment they allowed alcohol to be sold and bought, it stopped the breaking of that law. The same can go for immigration.”



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