

Tens of thousands march against immigration raids in the US

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Tens of thousands of workers and students marched in dozens of US cities on May 1 to defend the rights of undocumented workers and all other immigrants. There were demonstrations in Los Angeles and a score of other cities, including Washington, Milwaukee, New York, Chicago, Seattle, Boston, Houston, Dallas and Detroit.

The protesters denounced government raids on factories and demanded the legislation of the more than 12 million undocumented workers who live in the United States. Many protesters also carried signs demanding drivers' licenses for undocumented workers, denouncing high gasoline prices, and demanding an end to the war on Iraq. The march included many legal residents with relatives who are undocumented and were afraid to protest themselves.

The marches, set to coincide with international day of workers' solidarity, were much smaller than in 2006 when nearly 1.5 million workers marched in Los Angeles and Chicago, joined by hundreds of thousands in nearly 100 other cities to protest against legislation passed by the US House of Representatives that would have turned every undocumented worker in the US into a felon, subject to imprisonment. The same bill would have made it criminal for any US citizen, including medical professionals, social workers and teachers, to provide any services to immigrants without visas.

In contrast, the numbers this time were much more modest, with about 10,000 marching in Los Angeles and less than 5,000 in New York City. Sizeable demonstrations also took place in Chicago and Milwaukee, while only a few hundred turned out in Houston and San Francisco. The immigrant marchers were mostly from Mexico and Central America, while other participants came from the Caribbean, South Korea and the Philippines.

No doubt the decrease in the number of demonstrators was attributable in no small degree to the climate of fear created by the record numbers of deportations and immigration raids carried out by the government over the past year, and the generalized demonization of undocumented workers promoted by both major political parties as well as the mass

media. According to the figures recorded by the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement, deportations from the US have increased by close to 60 percent since 2005.

Meanwhile, the virtual militarization of the US-Mexican border has had the effect of trapping Mexican immigrants in the US—estimated at 11 million—cutting them off from the families they left behind in search of work in the north.

This section of the working class has also been hit the hardest by the deepening economic crisis, which has had a particular impact upon construction jobs, a major source of employment for immigrant workers. On the eve of the demonstration, the Inter-American Development Bank reported that some 3 million Latin American immigrants in the US have stopped sending money home to their families over the past two years as a result of the deteriorating economic conditions.

Senate Republicans, meanwhile, are preparing to introduce new legislation next week to criminalize and persecute undocumented immigrants in the US. The proposed bill would mandate the imprisonment of immigrants caught crossing the border, create obstacles for the undocumented opening bank accounts, and require that all those communicating with federal agencies do so in English. The legislation would also cut federal funding for states issuing drivers' licenses to undocumented immigrants, and for cities that do not allow their police forces to arrest people based upon their immigration status.

Those who demonstrated did so in defiance of this wave of repression. In Los Angeles, over 700 high school students joined the protest, together with workers from a factory that was raided by the government earlier this year.

In Milwaukee, marchers chanted slogans demanding that Democratic candidates Clinton and Obama take a stand against immigration raids. Since 2006, Minnesota and Iowa meat packing plants have been aggressively targeted for immigration raids by the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency of the US government (ICE).

In this year's protests, organizers placed an emphasis on voter registration and the upcoming elections. According to

the *Los Angeles Times*, groups such as the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights, the We Are America Alliance and the SEIU, groups that support the Democratic Party are focusing on encouraging legal immigrants to apply for US citizenship and register to vote. At the Chicago protest, some workers indicated that they would vote for whichever candidate has a stronger program on this issue.

This will prove to be a dead-end strategy. Neither of the two contenders for the Democratic Party's presidential nomination, Senators Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, nor Senator John McCain, the Republican candidate, have shown any inclination to advance policies aimed at ending the repression of immigrants and granting them basic rights as workers.

Clinton has combined tough talk on border enforcement and on the treatment of immigrants convicted of a crime—she is for immediate deportation—with support for some form of guest worker program assuring agribusiness and other sections of employers with a secure supply of cheap labor. Obama's main disagreement with Clinton on this issue appears to be over drivers' licenses for undocumented immigrants—she is against granting licenses, he is in favor.

On the Republican side, McCain, a former supporter of the guest worker program, now favors shutting down the US border with Mexico.

In her comment on the protests, Clinton promised to introduce an immigration bill during her first 100 days in office. Senator Obama refrained from any concrete proposal and instead called on all immigrants to fight for their demands by registering to vote.

None of these candidates have seriously addressed the human cost of the current immigration policy. Over four thousand immigrants have died crossing the US-Mexico border since Operation Gatekeeper was instituted under President Bill Clinton in 1994. This operation, a bi-partisan measure, was designed to severely restrict access for immigrants from Mexico and Central America and served to divert the inevitable flow of migrants into the punishing desert.

Since then Democratic and Republican politicians alike have acted to further repress the movement of immigrants, effectively subordinating the human rights of this section of the working class to the profit needs of US businesses. This is the case both in relation to supposed Democratic liberals like Obama and Clinton and those attempting to appeal to the xenophobia of the extreme right wing, like McCain.

In California and elsewhere across the country, businesses engaged in agriculture, construction and light manufacturing have begun to raise concerns over the increase in government raids and the generalized crackdown on immigrants. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, last year

there were 4,900 raids on factories, 21 times more than in 2001. The number of undocumented immigrants arrested between 2001 and 2007 jumped 870 percent, from 510 to 4,940. In some cases, single parents were unable to return home, leaving their children abandoned.

This year over a dozen raids took place in Los Angeles County. In the suburb of Van Nuys, 130 immigrants were arrested in a raid on Micro Solutions, a manufacturer of ink-jet supplies. That is not good for business, according to Jack Kyser, chief economist of the Los Angeles County Development Corporation, which recently released a study that found that tens of thousands of jobs would be lost in the furniture, food and fashion industries if even a few of these companies were forced to leave the state as a consequence of immigration raids.

Despite the protests, ICE raids will continue. Even as immigration rallies took place across the nation, Michael Chertoff, who heads the Department of Homeland Security, wrote in an opinion piece in the Department of Homeland Security Department's *Leadership Journal* that "when it comes to illegal immigration, the American people are tired of thirty years of lip service. They want our laws enforced... I have directed my department to pursue that mandate, using all the tools permitted by law." He stated that the department will "drive businesses to comply with laws against employing illegal workers," and "when we encounter those who are here illegally," ICE will remove them.



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