

At massive march in Washington:

Immigrant workers protest raids, deportations under Obama

Samuel Davidson
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At the massive march in Washington Sunday, immigrant workers condemned the continuing raids, deportations and discrimination they are suffering under the Obama administration, even as speakers from the platform urged support for the Democrats.

Estimates of the numbers who participated in Sunday's demonstration ranged from 200,000 to half a million, as immigrant workers, their families and supporters packed the national mall in to demand an end to deportations and legal rights for the 12 million undocumented workers living in the United States.

Hundreds of buses from 35 states began dropping off demonstrators, some as early as 9 a.m. for the rally that was to begin at 1 p.m. Thousands of people came from as far away as California, Texas and Florida for what is by far the largest demonstration anywhere in the US since Barack Obama took office.

All ages, from babies in strollers to the elderly, took part. Many families consisting of three generations could be seen walking together or listening to the speakers. In many cases, the grandparents had come to the US with young children who are now grown with children of their own, who were born in the US and are citizens.

The National Mall was completely filled from 7th Street to 12th Street with many more people extending toward 14th Street and the Washington Monument. The speakers began addressing the huge crowd around 1 p.m. At 3 p.m., as the speeches continued, the protesters began their three-mile march past the Capitol toward JFK Stadium. By 5 p.m., as the speeches finished, the mall was still half full.

Many of those who came to the demonstration crowd expressed outrage at President Obama for his administration's continuation of arrests and deportations of undocumented workers that continue to break up families. During the first year of the Obama administration, more than 400,000 people have been deported, up 5 percent from the last year of the Bush administration and more than in any year under Bush.

Many immigrants who came to the US without documents now have children who were born in the US and thus are US citizens. Every day, hundreds of such people are being arrested and deported, while their children must remain.

Sisters Jose, 24, and Marilyn 21, both born in the US, came to the demonstration because their father was deported two years ago.

Marilyn explained what happened. "One day when I was coming home from work, my father called to say that he was getting calls from strange numbers and wanted to know if maybe I was trying to get hold of him. When I got home, my mother asked me where my father was because his

truck was parked outside, but he was not home. Later we found out that when he got home, two men had been parked near our house in a van and approached him and asked him who he was. When he told them, they said they had papers to arrest him.

"He was taken to a detention center in Chicago and held there for three months and then sent back to Mexico."

Jose continued: "He had been here for more than 20 years. He was trying to fix his papers. He was dealing with a corrupt lawyer who was supposed to be helping him, but who just took a lot of money and then turned him over to immigration.

"We have tried to get him a waiver, but they say that we can't because we are his daughters. They say that only his parents or his spouse can do that. But our mother can't because she does not have any papers either, and now they are trying to deport her as well.

"We don't think this is fair. We deserve rights like everyone else. We work, we pay taxes, and everyone should be equal. This country was built by immigrants.

"We relied upon Obama because he made promises to support immigrants. But he is not doing it. We are not seeing the changes that he promised us."

A group of three families who came to the demonstration from Chicago had sons and daughters who had joined the US military and were killed in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Now, the government is trying to deport them because they are undocumented.

Juan Torres lost his son in Afghanistan "We are here, two mothers and one father who have lost their children in this war, yet we are treated like we are criminals. Our kids fought and died for this country, but we cannot work in this country.

Juan's son, also named Juan, was 25 when he died on July 12, 2004, in Afghanistan. "He was in the Army Reserves for seven years and 10 months. In just 10 more days he would have finished his contract.

"There are so far 116 soldiers who have died fighting for this country but who did not have any papers. They say thank you, you served your country, but if you work you are a criminal.

"I have been here for 27 years. My son was given his citizenship one week before he was shipped to Afghanistan, and he came home to me in a coffin."

Olivia Segura's daughter, Specialist Ashley Sietsema, was killed on Veterans Day, November 12, 2007, in Kuwait. She was 20 years old. "She was a medic; they were transporting people to a hospital when the vehicle overturned. She was the only one killed. We still don't have an answer as to why.

"My husband is now being deported. When she died, he was so upset,

he didn't know how to deal with it and he started drinking. He was arrested, and now they are deporting him because he doesn't have any papers.

"Ashley was recruited while she was in high school. She liked this country and felt that she had a responsibility to serve it. She was not yet 18 when she joined up, so we had to sign for her. They didn't ask me or my husband for any papers to let her go fight for this country. Now, we are not good enough to live here.

"My life has changed so much. I have lost my daughter, my husband is in jail and they are trying to deport him. My house is in foreclosure since he is no longer working.

"When my daughter was killed, Barack Obama was still a senator. He sent us a personal letter saying how sorry he was and how we should be proud and that my daughter had served her country. Now I have sent him a letter asking if he could help us, and I get no response."

While many in the crowd expressed their outrage over the role of the Obama administration, the organizers of the rally and those who were brought onto the speakers' platform were supporters of the Obama administration and the Democratic Party.

Shortly after the rally began, the organizers played a videotaped message from Obama who repeated his promises to reform a "broken immigration system" without giving details of what those reforms would amount to. Significantly, the White House did not post the recorded speech or even a reference to it on its web site.

Obama said he would seek a "to forge a bipartisan consensus" on immigration, while praising Democratic Senator Charles Schumer of New York and Republican Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina for advancing a "common sense" framework for an overhaul of immigration laws.

The proposal floated by Graham and Schumer will deepen the attack on immigrants. While sketchy on details, the proposal outlined in an opinion piece in the *Washington Post* last week states that all undocumented workers would be required to plead guilty to breaking the law, pay fines and all back taxes, and do community service.

Many undocumented workers would be unable to meet these onerous requirements since they are among the lowest-paid section of the working class and hard hit by rising unemployment. Many, particularly those working in the food industry, live in conditions that parallel slavery.

Those who would be able to qualify under the Graham-Schumer plan would be required to go "to the back of the line" of prospective immigrants to legalize their status in the US. This would mean going into a state of legal limbo for years, and potentially being forced to return to their native countries to wait for the US government to deal with the backlog of visa applications.

Another aspect of the Graham-Schumer plan would relegate a section of immigrant workers to temporary status, providing cheap and subjugated labor for US corporations and then, after a fixed period, being forced to return to their countries.

Speaker after speaker on the platform Sunday supported Obama and the Democrats, while in some cases warning that they need to keep their promise to immigrants or risk losing the Hispanic vote. Speakers repeatedly reminded the audience that Hispanics—the second largest and fastest growing minority in America—voted overwhelmingly for Obama and the Democrats in the past elections, and that if they were to sit out in the November mid-term elections, the Democrats could lose a number of seats in both the House and Senate.

Representative Nydia Velázquez, a Democrat from New York and chairwoman of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, summed up this outlook when she warned, "Don't forget that in the last presidential election 10 million Hispanics came out to vote." She urged the audience

to tell members of Congress "that you will not forget which side of this debate they stood on."

Senator Robert Menendez, Democrat of New Jersey, told the crowd to continue supporting the Obama administration, saying that he thought an immigration bill could pass by the end of the year, after the storm of the November elections had passed.

Other speakers included NAACP President Benjamin Jealous, Jesse Jackson and a representative of the AFL-CIO bureaucracy.

However, as the Graham-Schumer proposal makes clear, any new immigration legislation would amount to a continued attack on immigrant workers. Even this proposal will be denounced as "too liberal" by the right wing. As in the so-called health care debate, in the name of winning bipartisan support, the Democrats would incorporate even more repressive measures before any vote is taken.

The defense of basic democratic rights for all workers, both documented and undocumented, can only be found in the unification of the entire working class internationally on a socialist program, including the fight for the right of every worker to live and work in the country of their choice with full and equal rights.

Many other workers and students spoke with the WWS at Sunday's demonstration.

Sofia was there along with her family. They are from Mexico and are living in Maryland. "We want reform of the immigration system. I want to see my grandmother. I have not seen her in 11 years. I wasn't born in America, so if I go to see her I will not be allowed to come back.

"My father has been here for 13 years. My mother has been here for 11 years. They have worked hard, paid their taxes and never broken any laws. That should be long enough to prove that they are good people and should get to stay. Yet we could be arrested and sent back anytime.

"When I graduate high school, I want to be able to go to college. But I can't unless I get my papers."

Anna, who is from El Salvador and living in Virginia, expressed her outrage over the treatment of immigrant workers.

"I am here to support all the illegal immigrants and to help kids not get separated from their parents. People just come here to work, but they get treated like they are criminals when they are not.

"Everything is getting worse; there are more and more raids, arrests and deportations. Even if they don't want to give people their papers, they should just let them live in peace.

"I have seen a lot of examples where children are getting separated from their parents. Their parents came here 10, 15, some even 20 years ago, and have been working and paying taxes all the time. The children are born here so they are US citizens, but the parents have never been given papers. After all this time, they are arrested and deported. It is not right.

"My parents immigrated to this country. If you go back in anybody's history, at some point everyone's parents immigrated. It is not right that we are being treated different. We just want equality."

Raja Tular, who immigrated from Nepal and now lives in New York, said that this was his first demonstration. "I never thought that illegal immigrants were a problem. But after 9/11, the federal government has started going after all these people who have never done anything wrong.

"Now, the government is deporting people without cause. If someone gets stopped for a minor offense like a traffic violation, they are being deported.

"When Bush was the president, he said that he would help immigrants, but he did nothing. Now Obama is president, he also said that he would help reform the immigration laws, but more people are still getting deported. That innocent people have to suffer is wrong.

"I think the government doesn't want to give immigrants documents because this way they can be exploited. A lot of immigrants are very poor.

Businesses can take advantage of them; they say they have to work for very little, and the businesses don't pay the taxes for them. If the people complain, they just threaten to have them deported.”



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