

Tens of thousands demonstrate on May Day in defense of immigrants

WSWS reporting teams
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Tens of thousands of immigrant workers and their supporters participated in demonstrations across the United States on May Day to oppose the growing attacks on undocumented workers.

The recent passage by the state of Arizona of draconian anti-immigrant legislation fueled turnout at the demonstrations. The law requires police to stop anyone they suspect of being an undocumented immigrant. Police are empowered to arrest, imprison and deport those found without proper identification.

Some of the largest demonstrations took place in California, with more than 60,000 participating in a march and rally in Los Angeles. Large protests were also held in San Francisco and San Diego. Some 20,000 demonstrated in Dallas and a reported 7,000 in Houston. A rally in Chicago drew 20,000 while a rally in New York City drew thousands. Altogether, rallies and marches took place in 70 cities.

The central demand raised by workers participating in the protests was a halt to arrests and deportations and the legalization of all undocumented workers. This stood in sharp contrast to the perspective of Democratic politicians, such as Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa and Illinois Congressman Luis Gutierrez.

Democrats and their liberal supporters are attempting to channel opposition to the Arizona law behind support for the reactionary “immigration reform” legislation supported by the Obama administration. The proposal would set up a national identity card system, vastly expand the militarization of the border, and set up a punitive system to punish undocumented immigrants.

In Washington DC on Saturday Congressman Gutierrez was arrested in a protest stunt in front of the White House. In an appearance Sunday on the CBS program Face the Nation, Gutierrez called for stronger border security and indicated support for a national ID card system.

SEP supporters attended May Day rallies in cities across the United States. They distributed copies of a WSWS statement, “Full Rights for All Immigrants! For the International Unity of the Working Class!”, opposing the Arizona law and the proposals by the Obama administration, and calling for a socialist movement to advance the interests of all workers, in opposition to the Democrats and Republicans.

WSWS reporting teams from demonstrations in a number of cities, interviewing those in attendance.

New York

In New York City, several thousand protesters gathered downtown and around one thousand assembled at Union Square, a very modest turnout considering New York is home to an estimated three million foreign born residents. Figures from the Democratic Party establishment dominated the speaker’s platform, with the likes of Democratic Congressman Charles

Rangel and union bureaucrats lining up to posture as defenders of immigrants.

Manuel, an immigrant from Mexico, summed up the prevailing skepticism among workers that these forces, led by President Obama, are willing to take up any struggle on behalf of immigrants. He told the WSWS, “This protest movement does not have any power and is not going to change the attitude of Obama. He isn’t going to do anything to benefit the workers, because he represents other interests.”

“I am against this law that they passed in Arizona,” Manuel added. “It is a racist law against Latino workers. I think that the inter-American unity of the working class is the most important thing for defending immigrants.”

Alberto, a worker from Ecuador, told the WSWS: “I am not in agreement with the Arizona law because it is an attack against the Latin American working class. Obama is going to do nothing. We have already seen that he hasn’t solved anything in the last year.

“Few people have shown up for this march. A lot of people didn’t come because they have resigned themselves to the fact that they have neither a voice nor a vote in what happens here. We need to develop the political consciousness and education of the working class.”

“This is a country of immigrants,” said Gloria from El Salvador, “and the Arizona law is against the US Constitution. It will only promote racism and deprive many of our children of an education. Not many people marched today because they are afraid of immigration [officials], and because they have lost faith in protest movements, because they haven’t seen any results. The reality is that Barack Obama has done nothing for the people who elected him.”

California

Democratic Party officials sought to co-opt the large protest in Los Angeles, which was supported by Los Angeles Mayor Villaraigosa. He was among those addressing the rally at the conclusion of the march. While criticizing the Arizona law, he called for support for Obama’s regressive immigration bill. Organizers encouraged nationalist sentiment, distributing large numbers of American flags to participants.

Elio studies sign painting and graphics at Los Angeles Trade Technical Community College. He told the WSWS, “All my family members are immigrants. My sister had to go back to Guatemala because she can’t find work; my nieces had to follow her. That’s what brings me to this demonstration.

When asked about the problem of unemployment Elio replied, “I think that they should let everyone work. As immigrants we are so limited, we are being held down. I think it is a beautiful idea that everyone have jobs and be able to work.

“They are pitting everybody against each other,” Elio added. “Even within the immigrant community. I bet that the police would like to attack this protest, like they did at MacArthur Park a couple of years ago. They can’t because Mayor Villaraigosa endorsed it. But when the schools walked out because of the immigration laws last time, all he would say is ‘go back to school, we are going to take care of everything, don’t protest, go about your regular day.’ But they took care of nothing. They lied to us. Everybody gets manipulated, but everyone is getting tired.”

Wendy is a veterinary technician in Glendale. She told the WWS, “Every immigrant simply wants a better life. People come here because they are being pushed by the bad conditions and the lack of work in their countries. Our countries have so little. We need to fight for the future of our families. We need to share with each other and reject racism.”

“There is no money for schools; there is no money for people losing their homes. The family of one of my relatives is losing its home. They try to pay what they can, but the bank is refusing to make any kind of deal; they insist on raising their monthly payment.”

Ossiel is a photography student at El Camino and Pasadena Community Colleges in Los Angeles. “I believe that it does not matter where people are born, they should be able to live cooperatively anywhere.”

“It is not the fault of immigrants that there are no jobs,” he added. “The problem is with capitalism, in that the system is spending money it does not have to rescue Wall Street and then turning around and taking the money from people who do not have it.”

At San Diego’s Chicano Park, approximately 1,500-2,000 demonstrators gathered for the protest. Afterward they marched downtown for another rally in front of the federal building.

Many participants said they came in response to the Arizona legislation. One student, Erica, told WWS, “In a way they did us a favor. I don’t think so many people would be out here if it weren’t for Arizona law. It is going to wake people up.”

Many signs mentioned the legislation, often comparing the law to those of Nazi Germany.

March organizers, trade union and Hispanic student organizations, encouraged both American and Mexican nationalist sentiment. The flags of both countries were about equally represented.

The speakers encouraged illusions in Obama. A local teacher, for example, after criticizing Obama for continuing the policies of Bush, said, “Unifying our voices is how we are going to get Obama, with all his charisma, to fight for us.”

WWS reporters talked to a number of those in attendance. One group of students was particularly hostile toward the Obama administration. “He was supposed to bring reform,” said one student, “but we haven’t seen it. He is doing the same things as Bush. I know he sent more troops to Afghanistan, maybe not Iraq, but it is the same thing.”

Melissa said that the Democrats and the Republicans are acting in collusion to scapegoat immigrants. When asked if the two parties could ever offer a solution, however, she said yes. “The people are not voting right,” said Torres. “We need to vote and make sure our voices are being heard.”

Sergio, student at Palomar College, likened the Arizona law to the repression of the Jews in Germany: “In Germany the Gestapo asked for your ID, and if you were a Jew they took you away and locked you up. This is America, the land of opportunity. How can it be a land of opportunity if they’re taking away immigrants rights?”

Boston

Two to three thousand people rallied in East Boston to protest the Arizona bill and demand full rights for immigrant workers.

Jose told the WWS, “I am part of the Student Immigrant Movement. We have chapters across the state and we are organizing youth, students from the different areas of the world, Chinese descent and from everywhere. We are focused on education.

“Obama was promising everybody that he was going to stop the deportations, he was going to pass immigration reform and until now we have not got anything like that,” Jose said. “We have been getting more people deported.”

The WWS also spoke to Patricia of Centro Presente, an organization that defends the rights of the Latino community. “We need respect for immigrant workers, and right now our community is not receiving justice. We are receiving raids, detention and deportation, and that is not the solution. We need to have a just and fair immigration reform.

“Under the Obama administration there are more raids happening,” she added. “We need to stop the raids. We need to stop the separation of immigrant families. We need to fight for justice and I think that this is the moment.

“Sometimes they are incarcerating people in these raids, but they are accelerating the process to persecute and deport workers, especially Latinos. There are many detention centers to hold immigrants and Latino workers, and we want to stop that. We are trying to organize and educate our community.

Lourdes said, “I came here as an illegal immigrant, and I started in bilingual classes, and that is how I started towards my future in the United States, and I became a US citizen back in 1997. I am from Honduras and I have been here since 1982.

“There are no words to say what they are trying to do to people. They treat them as if they are animals. We all have immigrants in our backgrounds. Their parents must have been immigrants also, back in the 1950s and 1940s, so why are they doing this to the people who come now?”

“I think they are doing this because they think we have invaded this country. But the reason why we as immigrants came to this country is for a better future. As a mother now I would do it for the future of my kids, and that is what the parents did it for.”

Chicago

In Chicago an estimated 20,000 people took part in the May Day demonstration, demanding rights for immigrant workers and declaring their opposition to Arizona’s State Bill 1070. Thousands of workers, students and other young people marched through working class neighborhoods along the two-mile route from Union Park to Daley Plaza downtown.

During the rally, documented and undocumented workers and their children addressed the crowd, and explained the difficulties they face in getting education, the constant fear of arrest and deportation, and their determination to fight for recognition of all immigrants.

Several trade union and political figures, including Reverend Jesse Jackson, called for a boycott of Arizona while remaining silent on the reactionary “immigration reform” bill being advanced by the Democratic Party.

Abigail Reyna, a recent high school graduate and mother of a young daughter, expects her husband, Donaciano, to be deported next month. She told the WWS, “There is no chance for him to know his daughter... they break up families. They have to stop [the deportations].”

Alfonso, a worker at a sign shop who came here from Mexico, said, “I know people who are children of immigrants, who were born here and are trying to go to school. They can’t attend because they don’t have the necessary paperwork or social security numbers. It’s not their fault.” Alfonso also expressed his disappointment and anger with the Obama. “He promised a lot but hasn’t done much...I’m disappointed, specifically because he hasn’t lived up to his pledge to reform immigration laws within his first 100 days.”

Maria, a Mexican worker, said, “We came here to get immigration reform. Arizona’s law is really bad and discriminatory against Latinos. They want to deport people and break up families. They want to send mothers and fathers away. They don’t care about children. They are separating families. Take away Obama’s daughters and see how he feels.”

Detroit

About 500 supporters of immigrant rights marched to Clark Park through a largely Hispanic working class neighborhood in southwest Detroit. The marchers included immigrant workers and housewives as well as college and high school youth. Banners called for overturning Arizona’s anti-immigrant law and for an end to the arrest and deportation of undocumented workers.

Christina and her friend Araseli attended the rally in southwest Detroit. Both are high school students from Toledo, Ohio, who made the one hour trip to Detroit with others from their school to support immigrant rights. Christina told the WSWS, “We have talked about this in our Spanish club, we’ve held meetings and done volunteer work putting up posters and making speeches in class. It is not right what they are doing. The students have a lot of awareness to what is happening.

“Obama’s immigration stuff is not right, it will cause a lot of problems if it is not fixed. If he tries to put ID cards on Latinos, we will protest until something is done to stop it.”

Claudia, an immigrant worker from southwest Detroit attended the rally with her 20-year-old daughter, who is undocumented. She spoke about the impact of the harsh US immigration policies on ordinary workers. “It is bad for the kids; we cannot send our kids to school or to the doctor. People only come here to find work, nothing else. We pay taxes.”

Her daughter added, “I cannot go to school because I am not a citizen, that is very bad.”

Some 500 people held a mock graduation ceremony for undocumented workers near the site of Obama’s commencement speech at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. Eight undocumented immigrant youth were part of a group that marched 45 miles from Detroit to attend the rally. A contingent of immigrants from the Middle East also took part.

Minneapolis

In Minneapolis, a broad section of workers, youth and students gathered at Martin Luther King Park in South Minneapolis and marched some forty blocks to the city’s center. Several hundred began the march, and it swelled to more than 3,000 as it wound its way through neighborhoods and business districts.

Carmin, an immigrant from Mexico who lives in Minnesota with her family told the WSWS, “No way, we don’t want the Arizona law. We already have enough people getting killed trying to cross the border. How will the police know whether people have papers or not? The law is set up

so even if I have papers, but don’t carry them, I could be targeted.

“One member of my family doesn’t have papers, and I have friends that don’t have them either, and they are afraid. They cry because if they are caught, they sometimes deport the parents, and the kids are left behind. There is also so much danger in leaving the country to go back home to Mexico. You might not be able to return.

America, a Mexican immigrant living in the Twin Cities said, “The Arizona law is not fair. Not just for us, but all people, whether they speak Spanish or any other language.

“I have a brother in Arizona. He has dark skin. And so do his three children. They stand out and they are really afraid. When they go to church, or they go to the store, and they see white people, they believe they will be reported. They aren’t doing anything wrong. The only thing they do is work very, very hard.

“I thought Barack Obama was going to be my best president. He promised, he gave us hope. But now it’s been over a year since he was elected, and he hasn’t done anything. All he says is ‘blah, blah, blah.’ Nothing has changed.”



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