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Rally for immigrant rights

Attendance lower, but marchers push for reform

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Thousands of immigrants and supporters carrying flags and chanting, "*Sí, se puede*," ("Yes, we can") marched through downtown Thursday for comprehensive immigration reform and a halt to the workplace raids that have reached record levels.

This year's event drew fewer than the throngs that turned out last year, when Milwaukee had one of the largest May Day immigrant marches in the country.

Nationally, the marches and rallies that have been staged coast to coast for three years have dropped in attendance each year as efforts to reform immigration laws have stalled in Congress and enforcement efforts have picked up.

A supporter of stricter enforcement, Rosemary Jenks of NumbersUSA in Washington, D.C., said she believes the marches have backfired and bolstered those who favor more enforcement among the country's estimated 12 million illegal immigrants.

Christine Neumann-Ortiz, director of Voces de la Frontera, who organized the Milwaukee marches, said she was pleased with Thursday's turnout, given there had been less time to organize this year. "We had to devote a lot of time to respond to families with issues affected by the raids," she said.

She said a permit to use a portion of the street was requested too late, so marchers had to snake across the 6th Street Viaduct and down Wisconsin Ave. on the sidewalk, darting through scaffolding at one point.

The marchers included people of all ages, from some seniors in wheelchairs to parents pushing strollers or walking with their children. Many carried signs that read, "Today we march; tomorrow we vote."

This year's march attracted more student and faith-based groups.

About 50 students from Riverside University High School donned blue caps and gowns to call attention to the fact that many illegal immigrants struggle to continue their education because their status doesn't allow them federal aid for college. Francisca Meraz, 14, one of the students, said she has friends and family who fall into that category.

"Students want and need an education, regardless of their status," she said.

Many chanted, "We are students; we are not criminals," in Spanish and English.

Students from Pius XI High School carried a banner that read, "Pius XI students united for immigrant rights."

"It's May 1 and the day for people who are wrongly persecuted," said Kevin Jennings, 16, a junior at the school.

The march was led off by 100 students wearing "First 100 Days" T-shirts, calling for comprehensive immigration reform within the first 100 days of a new presidential administration.

"I came to the march because I know many people in my congregation who are exploited and suffer," said Pastor Richard Peterson, 56, of Faith Lutheran Church. "There's a need for immigration reform."

Debbie Davis, 46, a history teacher at Pulaski High School who said she was once a performance artist, dressed as the Statue of Liberty and walked on stilts along the route of the march.

At Veterans Park, David Newby, Wisconsin president of the AFL-CIO, told the crowd: "All workers have rights. We're all in this together."

Under the Bush administration, money has been taken from the federal agency that looks after worker safety, he said. From 2005 to 2006, he said, there was a 7% increase in the number of Latino workers killed on the job, 25% higher than the national average, he said. "An injury to one is an injury to all."

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