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Crowds Are Smaller at Protests by Immigrants

By [RANDAL C. ARCHIBOLD](#)

LOS ANGELES — Thousands of immigrants and their supporters marched in several cities on Thursday to demand civil rights at a time when crackdowns against illegal immigrants are rising.

The May Day demonstrations were significantly smaller than in previous years, and gone were calls for a nationwide boycott of businesses and work, as protest leaders had urged last year. The Spanish-language D.J.'s who had heavily promoted previous marches stuck largely to their regular programming. And disagreements among advocates over the best approach to winning legal status for illegal immigrants had diminished organizing firepower, with many groups turning their attention to voter registration and citizenship drives.

In many cities, including New York, Chicago, Houston and Los Angeles, crowds were a small fraction of those in previous years, with few people outside protest areas even aware that marches were under way.

Some supporters said they had lost a rallying cry in the stalled effort in Congress to revamp [immigration](#) law. At the same time, with the government stepping up border and immigration enforcement, a cloud of fear has settled over immigrants who were worried that the rallies would lead to more sweeps.

Milwaukee had one of the more robust turnouts, with thousands of people gathering, as they did last year. Protesters called on the presidential candidates, each of whom has supported Congressional efforts to allow a way for certain illegal immigrants to gain legal status, to make immigration issues a priority.

“We want a commitment from the three presidential candidates to pass humane immigration reform in the first 100 days in office,” said Christine Neumann-Ortiz, director of Voces de la Frontera, the main organization behind the Milwaukee march.

In Los Angeles, where riot police officers beat and shoved demonstrators and journalists last year, some marchers were concerned about trouble, though across the nation the marches were largely peaceful.

“Today the police didn’t bring their batons,” Jorge Reyes called out in Spanish from a truck in downtown Los Angeles. “Today they came in peace to help us legalize the 12 million immigrants in this country.”

Messages on T-shirts and signs and protest leaders with bullhorns demanded an end to immigration raids that have led to an increasing number of deportations. The United States deported 280,000 people last year, a 44 percent increase over the previous year.

Mayor [Antonio R. Villaraigosa](#) of Los Angeles, who has called on the [Department of Homeland Security](#) to halt most workplace raids, joined business and labor leaders on Wednesday to announce the results of a study that found the raids harmful to the economy. The study said 50 percent or more of workers in some

local industries were in the country illegally, and it projected great harm to the region if businesses closed or moved because of the immigration sweeps.

Supporters of tighter controls on immigration said the rallies had done little but energize their backers. Leaders of NumbersUSA, one of the larger groups advocating a clampdown on illegal immigration, urged its members to call members of Congress and use the rallies to help make their case.

“The marchers say suspend the rule of law and reward illegality,” said Roy Beck, executive director of NumbersUSA, which says its membership has swelled to more than 600,000 from 112,000 three years ago.

“Our callers say what your constituents really want is enforcement,” Mr. Beck added. “We want to take away the jobs magnet and basically create an inhospitable environment for immigration law breakers so more and more will decide to go home or not come.”

Counterdemonstrators appeared at some rallies, including in Boston, where the police had to separate demonstrators who became embroiled in profanity-laced exchanges.

Though meager, the crowds were often festive and melded a variety of causes. A rally in Union Square Park in Manhattan drew several hundred people invoking socialism, police violence and Sept. 11 conspiracy theories, in addition to immigrant rights.

Lisa Melendez, a community-college librarian from Long Island, said she attended the Union Square rally to advocate legalization for her students, many of whom are Mexican or Ecuadorean.

“For young women, it’s especially difficult, because you study so hard to get an engineering degree and then you end up having to baby sit or clean houses,” Ms. Melendez said as she stood by five students who had come with her.

Contributing reporting were Ana Facio Contreras in Los Angeles, C.J. Hughes in New York, J. Miner in Milwaukee and Katie Zezima in Boston.

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