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Crowd swells for immigration rally



Jeffrey Phelps

Thousands gather in Veterans Park for a rally after the march in support of immigration reform. The event attracted mainly families from southeastern Wisconsin, but some participants came from farther away.

By [Georgia Pabst](#) of the Journal Sentinel

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Amid economic troubles, a flu scare, the closing of some schools and the cancellation of the Cinco de Mayo festival in Milwaukee, Friday's immigration and worker rights march drew thousands who walked through downtown and rallied at the lakefront to continue the push for comprehensive immigration reform.

Although this year's crowd was large, it did not seem to be as large as in previous years, though no official estimates are made.

Similar marches were held in Madison and around the country, where attendance was reported to be lower than expected, largely because of the economic climate and worries about swine flu, which is centered in Mexico and has been felt in Latino communities in the United States. Some marchers wore face masks because of concerns.

John Hernandez, 33, carried a U.S. flag and wore a face mask as a precaution, he said. A machine operator, he took the day off to attend the march because "I think the time is right for immigration reform," he said in Spanish. "We work and are part of the economy, but we don't have all our rights."

Marchers carried U.S. flags and signs reading, "Family Unity," "Drivers' License Certificates for Safe Roads," and "Access to Higher Education." They shouted the now familiar "*Si se puede*; yes, we can" chant as they headed down Wisconsin Ave.

"You're incredible," Christine Neumann-Ortiz shouted to the crowd at the rally at Veterans Park. She's the founder and executive director of Voces de la Frontera, the immigrant rights group that's organized the annual marches since 2006.

"Thanks to the Latino vote, the marches and the work of a national immigration coalition, President (Barack) Obama has promised comprehensive immigration reform this year," she said. "We need to remain united."

While immigrant rights advocates believe the marches have advanced their cause, opponents also see them as helpful.

"The marches have been very useful politically because they mobilize a lot of Americans," said Mark Krikorian, director of the Center for Immigration Studies in Washington, which advocates for stricter immigration policy. "When they see large numbers take to the street and demand legal status, it motivates people, and it's far and away the best recruitment tool for immigration hawks."

While the march attracted mainly families from southeastern Wisconsin, there were some new faces. John Rosenow, a dairy farmer from Buffalo County in western Wisconsin who hires Mexicans to milk his cows and has become an outspoken advocate for immigrant rights, said he had never marched for anything in his life.

But he marched the two miles with the crowd and drew cheers when he told those gathered:

"We dairy farmers will work to get immigration laws changed so you can have the same rights I have."

The Associated Press contributed to this report.



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