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## Marchers flood downtown

### Event's leaders push for legal changes before election draws near

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Thousands of marchers paraded from the south side through downtown Milwaukee and on to the lakefront Tuesday, calling for a solution to the country's nagging immigration problems.

The march was part of a May Day effort to push for new laws to better deal with the nation's estimated 12 million illegal immigrants, and it was replicated in cities from coast to coast. It was the second consecutive year that Latino communities have attempted to bring the immigration issue out in the open. And this year there was a particular sense of urgency, because there is the sense that if there isn't some comprehensive legislation soon, the issue will be obscured in the race for president in 2008.

"This is another historic day in Wisconsin because it looks like last year's May 1 march," said Christine Neumann-Ortiz, director and founder of Voces de la Frontera, who organized both this year's and last year's events.

"People are sending a strong message that we need and want a law passed this year that will address an outdated and discriminatory immigration system that's hurting and terrorizing working-class families through raids and the politics of hate," she said.

She was referring to the stepped-up efforts by federal immigration authorities to apprehend and deport illegal immigrants in the past year.

Marchers of all ages, from infants in their mothers' arms to children in strollers to older people with canes, walked the two-mile route starting at S. 5th St. and W. National Ave. at the offices of Voces. They were legal and illegal, Latino and non-Latino; many carried American flags, and some carried Mexican flags. Their signs read "Justice and Dignity for all Immigrants," "Fair Immigration Reform Now" and "Stop the Raids."

At one point downtown, participants stretched down Water St. more than a mile, and anywhere from 10 to 20 people across. Nationally, crowds were reported down, but in Milwaukee - although estimates varied -

organizers thought at least 60,000 participated, a turnout similar to last year. Police don't give official crowd estimates.

There was a virtual human gridlock at Veterans Park, where the march ended with a rally, speakers and music. Thousands continued to stream in long after the park seemed filled, and many couldn't crowd in, so they remained on the bridge in front of the War Memorial Center.

"This is simply unbelievable that there are so many of you here," said Ricardo Chavez, the brother of the late United Farm Workers leader Cesar Chavez. Ricardo Chavez came from California for the march and rally. "Workers in California and all of us must struggle for immigrant rights," he said, adding that he's tired of hearing that immigrants take jobs from others and don't pay taxes.

Craig Oliver, state political action chair of the NAACP, called for blacks and Latinos to stand together for immigrant rights.

"This is not a protest, but a love fest for change," he told the crowd.

Police Sgt. Luis Gonzales said the march was peaceful and without incident. Along the march route, there appeared to be an absence of protesters.

People started lining up for the noon start an hour early, with mariachis and drummers keeping the atmosphere festive and light.

At the head of the march were veterans from the American GI Forum carrying Wisconsin and U.S. flags.

"I was born in Mexico, but fought in Vietnam, even though I wasn't a citizen," said Victor R. Vela, 73, of the GI Forum. "When I came back, I became a citizen."

Pedro Tafaya, 27, who attended the rally with his wife and three young children, said he hopes immigration laws will change to protect him and his family.

"I'm here for my children because they are citizens, and I'm hoping the march will help all of us," he said.

Several men wearing hard hats carried their Laborers International Union Local 113 banner.

"We're for immigration reform because workers contribute to the economy and have a right to be here, too," said Tony Neiha, business agent for the union. "We see the marches as a way for votes (in Congress) to change."

As the marchers went down Wisconsin Ave., many workers came out to watch the passing parade.

"I partly agree and partly don't agree with the marchers," said one man. "It's nice that they can do something like this. But on the other hand, I don't think people should take the day off from work."

That ambivalence is telling; the politics and economics of immigration policy make it particularly complex and divisive.

Bob Dane, press secretary for the Federation for American Immigration Reform in Washington, D.C., a group that favors strict immigration policies, said many U.S. residents oppose open borders or amnesty.

"It looks very much to us like the momentum of the illegal alien rights movement seems to be fizzling," he said. "I think the marches last year backfired."

Across the country, many rallies drew fewer marchers than last year. In Los Angeles, where several hundred thousand turned out last year, about 25,000 attended the first of two scheduled rallies, said police Capt. Andrew Smith. In Chicago, where more than 400,000 swarmed the streets a year earlier, police put Tuesday's estimates at 150,000.

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