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Demanding human rights

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On May 1, a critical mass of more than 80,000 people marched in Milwaukee, not just for immigrant rights but also for human rights. The estimated turnout broke last year's record as the largest march in Wisconsin history, and Milwaukee was the only city in the country to see an increase in turnout from last year.

Immigrants, Chicanos, African-Americans, Caucasians and others from all walks of life closed ranks to tell Milwaukee and the world: We stand together against an oppressive apartheid system that has been erected in this country that forces 12 million people to live in the shadows, locking them into low-wage jobs and remaining silent at abuse by employers.

A severed limb, a shortened paycheck, an unjust dismissal all can be foisted on immigrant labor. The march was a blow against tyranny. Heightened deaths and human rights violations at the southern border and stepped up raids that treat people as less than animals are all evidence of this tyranny.

The scapegoating, the building of detention centers, the disappearance of immigrants bring back haunting memories in our collective consciousness. The Holocaust started with the slow erosion of individual rights, centralization of power and an effective divide-and-conquer strategy.

At the end of last month, armed Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials raided Chicago's "Little Village," rounding up a Latino neighborhood. Fortunately, the community and local organizations protested for eight hours during the night and closed a main city street, resulting in the release of more than 150 people.

In contrast, a racist militia group in Alabama with the largest arsenal of arms and bombs in Southern history, which allegedly was planning to murder Mexicans, was busted but only given a slap on the wrist. The planned violence was not treated as domestic terrorism but as a minor charge with a maximum sentence of five years in jail.

The May 1 forest of humanity represented the best in America, the inclusive America. The America that embraces the famous sonnet by Emma Lazarus in 1883 that resides on the Statue of Liberty, which begins with: "Give us your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to be free. . . . Send those, the homeless, tempest-tost to me; I lift my lamp beside the golden door."

The America that embraces the courageous struggles of other racial and ethnic groups to achieve citizenship and a better life.

Craig Oliver, state NAACP representative said, "I stand before you as a soul whose people have endured the same inhumane treatment used against your people. The same dogs, chains and whips used against African-Americans to preserve what is now called a democracy are transformed into border patrols, traveling papers and midnight raids. Again, used in the name of democracy. A society that now, like then, seeks to preserve the rights of the few, to oppress the God-given rights of the many."

What is next for the immigrant rights movement in Wisconsin? The struggle will take many forms, including a national consumer boycott of businesses that have helped finance and lead the assault on immigrants, continued participation in the national campaign for fair and humane immigration, a statewide initiative to restore driver's licenses, a children's march on Mother's Day and forging of a powerful black, white and brown working-class coalition to take on powerful business interests that have benefited from the suffering of all workers.

Our struggle will not end until we win. *¡Si Se puede!*

Christine Neumann-Ortiz is director and founder of Voces de la Frontera. Al Levie is a teacher and a member of the group's state steering committee.

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