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LABORFEST: DOUBLE THE SIZE, DOUBLE THE CELEBRATION

Cloudy skies more than any media attempt to stir controversy threw a little chill on Laborfest 2006, leading a much larger crowd than normal to eat under cover rather than on the exposed metal benches in front of the Miller and Harley-Davidson stages, where lively music rolled all afternoon.



The threat of dark skies and ominous weather reports that Monday may have held down morning attendance somewhat. It certainly left the entire lakefront deserted. But Zeidler Union Square Park actually remained cool, sunny and welcoming as union marchers found their locals, T-shirts and food tickets and organized their big rigs, motorcycles and vintage cars for the parade down Wisconsin Avenue.

Meanwhile, on the South Side, a few hundred marchers gathered by 10 a.m. in front of Voces de la Frontera. Typical of the two mass marches put together earlier in 2006 by Voces, as the few started to march north, they suddenly grew into tens of thousands spilling out of sidestreets to cross the 6th St. bridge and hook up with the traditional parade sponsored by the Milwaukee County Labor Council.

The main parade, launched at 11 a.m., proceeded quickly down the avenue toward Summerfest (Maier Festival Park), sporting a higher number of flatbeds and construction vehicles than usual and some larger contingents from several unions – including Teamsters Local 200 and Operating Engineers Local 139.

Two or three locals – those whose marching contingents were traditionally small – said they were staying away because of the invitation to the Voces, which makes no bones that it helps all immigrant workers including those without the right papers. Both Sheila Cochran, secretary-treasurer of the MCLC, and Christine Neumann-Ortiz, founder of Voces, pointed out that Labor Day celebrates those who work, period. The issue of finding legal paths, leaders of union federations have bluntly stated, needs to be solved to protect the wages of all workers. Otherwise, the US will continue to foster a shadow class suffering workplace abuse that holds down all wages and benefits.

Pestered by one media interviewer if there would be “illegal workers” in the parade, Cochran quietly replied, “I don’t know what an illegal worker looks like.”

Given the getups and styles of some of the veteran union workers in the parade, she had a doubly fair point. From people in suits to marchers in eccentric costume, the parade was a hoot as well as a rainbow of coordinated colors within locals and unions.

Welcomed by labor contingents as they merged into the main parade, the immigrant workers and

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their families extended back more than 15 blocks. Inside Laborfest, they were further welcomed by bilingual booths, tables and union members.

The real finale, missed by much of the media coverage despite copters in the sky and TV interview cameras seeking to pluck dissenters from the crowd, came in the last three blocks of Chicago St. at the parade's conclusion.

There, union members who had completed their march stayed back to cheer, applaud and yell slogans of solidarity as the immigrant workers and their families arrived.

At about this point, the drops of rain became a drizzle. That changed the pattern of distribution as all guests headed for cover or less weather-threatened areas of the Summerfest grounds. With more food vendors than standard open for business, lines ran continuously about 15 people deep. Adult bingo was brisk. The Union Industries Tent area, with many community booths, was busier than normal. Immigrant worker arrivals nearly overwhelmed food ticket booths in their first rush of purchases, and there were steady crowds of children and even teenagers for the children's stage shows. The afternoon pro wrestling matches drew a steady mix of watchers, including the police officers patrolling the grounds.

The strong musical acts could be heard easily via amplification, but there were very few people willing to sit up close on drenched bleachers. For the musicians, the seats in front of them were empty but cheers and applause rang out from 50 yards away after each number. Among the group were the men of gospel providing great harmony and powerful solos as part of the Hansberry-Sands opening act, and the big bands, Spider George & the Web on the Miller, Resonance doing itself proud (and "Proud Mary") on the Harley stage.

Lt. Gov. Barbara Lawton and US Rep. Gwen Moore provided an opening welcome (delayed by rain), but all manner of elected officials and would-be officials were evident all day long. Gov. Doyle shook hands for more than half an hour at Zeidler Park before heading off for other organized labor events in Janesville and Madison. Marching the length of the parade were Sen. Herb Kohl, Atty. Gen. Peg Lautenschlager, DA candidate John Chisholm, sheriff candidate Vincent Bobot, and 5th State Senate District hopeful Jim Sullivan. Spotted on the grounds or the park were Mayor Tom Barrett, state Supreme Court Justice Louis Butler and an assortment of state legislators, county supervisors and city aldermen.

Attendance at Laborfest topped 10,000, confirmed by Summerfest turnstile totals of 8,457, while two thousand more entered the festival through designated gates and aboard large vehicles. As in past marches – indeed, as in past union parades – many of the participants joined the parade but headed right home afterward. A number of those who stayed brought families with them.