



SCHOOLS AND BUSINESSES BRACE FOR 'DAY WITHOUT IMMIGRANTS'

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Immigrants around the country are planning a day away from work and school to demonstrate the impact they have on America's culture and economy, but critics think the effort is misguided.

Organizers are calling the May 1 nationwide boycott "a day without an immigrant." They are asking that immigrants skip work or school and avoid spending money.

The boycott comes just weeks after hundreds of thousands of mostly Latino immigrants and supporters protested proposed laws that would crack down on illegal immigration.

Organizers say they want reforms that work to provide a path to citizenship for illegal workers.

"We want full amnesty, full legalization for anybody who is here," Jorge Rodriguez, a union official who organized earlier marches, told Reuters.

Impact on the economy?

It's estimated that millions of immigrants could participate in the day's events across the country.

"There will be 2 to 3 million people hitting the streets in Los Angeles alone. We're going to close down Los Angeles, Chicago, New York, Tucson, Phoenix, Fresno," said Rodriguez.

Some businesses that rely heavily on immigrant labor, such as restaurants, hotels, construction sites and farms, are making plans to close or operate with fewer employees.

They acknowledged the significant role that immigrants play in the U.S. economy.

"The bottom line is we need to find a way to design our immigration laws to protect our economy and match those people who want jobs with the number of jobs that exist," Mike Gempler, executive director of the Washington Growers' League, told the Seattle Times.

The restaurant industry is particularly dependent on illegal immigrant workers.

"These people work hard, they will do whatever, they sweep the floors, wash the dishes. If they go away you would have to pay Americans top dollar, and the next thing you know a hamburger would cost \$5," the manager of a New York City diner told Reuters.

Split in the immigrant community

Some Latino leaders think the May Day boycott could lead to further anti-immigration backlash among politicians and Americans in general.

“We support [a boycott], but not right now because we believe right now the ball is in the hands of the Senate,” Gustavo Torres, executive director of CASA de Maryland, told the Chicago Tribune.

The Senate plans to take up the immigration reform debate again after failing to pass legislation prior to its spring vacation.

Immigration advocates in general want a Senate bill to be less harsh than legislation passed by the House of Representatives that makes it a felon to be in the United States illegally and proposes building a wall on the U.S.-Mexican border.

Boycott alternatives

Some groups have suggested alternatives to a day-long boycott.

“We can make May 1st a ‘win-win’ day here in Southern California ... go to work, go to school, and then join thousands of us at a major rally afterward,” Cardinal Roger Mahony of the Los Angeles Catholic archdiocese said in a statement, according to Reuters.

Leaders from Latino Movement USA, one of the national event organizers, said any kind of participation would be good.

“The fact that most of the people are in fact doing different activities on May 1 [is] in itself a major step forward in the struggle for comprehensive immigration reform,” Juan Jose Gutierrez, director of Latino Movement USA, told the Washington Times.

“Without the boycott, they probably wouldn’t be doing anything at all.”

Some Americans’ views

Anti-immigration groups are not happy with the planned boycott.

“It’s intimidation when a million people march down main streets in our major cities under the Mexican flag,” Jim Gilchrist, founder of the Minuteman volunteer border patrol group, told Reuters.

Even some politically liberal Americans are conflicted about the recent pro-immigration rallies, according to experts.

“Here’s a population that for years had been quiet and easily dominated -- they do the work, make the low pay and send it home,” Gillian Royes, professor of multicultural relations and communications at Georgia State University, told the Seattle Times.

“Now the persona of the illegal immigrant is shifting in the American psyche that perhaps this is not the group to be taken for granted anymore.”

--Compiled by Annie Schleicher for NewsHour Extra

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