



'We are all immigrants'

Many turn out to show support

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Thousands of people left work and school Monday and took to the streets, voicing support for immigrant rights in marches, vigils and rallies in San Rafael.

An estimated 3,000 people gathered on the steps of Mission San Rafael Arcangel at 10 a.m. before marching three miles to the Marin Civic Center, where they held a rally at the lagoon.

A second march brought several hundred protesters from Albert Park to the Canal area headquarters of the Canal Alliance, one of the event's sponsors, later that afternoon. The events concluded with a series of speeches, performances and a candlelight vigil at the Canal Alliance's Larkspur Street building Monday evening.

Wearing white T-shirts, carrying signs and chanting "Si se puede" ("We can do it"), participants voiced support for a federal amnesty for illegal aliens. They also protested a proposed congressional bill that would declare undocumented workers to be felons and charge anyone helping them find jobs or housing with a crime.

"I take issue with people who say all immigrants are criminals," said Carlos Carrillo of San Rafael. "I'm a U.S. citizen and proud of it, but I do have some friends who are here illegally. They came here just as the English did. After all, we're all immigrants here."

As marchers surged down Lincoln Avenue and under the Highway 101 overpass, local traffic slowed to a standstill. Residents and workers lined the sidewalks, cheering on the marchers or simply watching them pass.

"I think it's a great cause," said Kathleen Brabo, a San Rafael resident whose parents immigrated from Haiti. "Our immigration laws do need to be remedied. Everyone deserves a chance."

Kim DeMarco, Brabo's co-worker, agreed, with reservations.

"Everyone deserves a chance, as long as they're able to do it legally," said DeMarco, who lives in Cotati. "As long as they're willing to obey the same laws and pay the same taxes as everyone else."

The march route was closely monitored by volunteers from the Canal Welcome Center, the event's co-sponsor, as well as officers from the San Rafael Police Department and the Marin County Sheriff's Office.

Police estimated the gathering at 3,000 people, but organizers said their count was more than twice that many.

Although marchers received cheers of support and encouragement, a small plane carrying a banner that read "Wake Up, America! Close the Borders!" flew overhead as the march approached the Civic Center.

The United States is home to more than 35 million people born in other countries, including an estimated 11 million to 12 million illegal immigrants. Three in four are from Latin America, a little more than half from Mexico, according to the Pew Hispanic Center. Illegal immigrants make up about 5 percent of the U.S. labor force, the center says.

The vast majority of Monday's marchers were recent immigrants who said they had come to the United States to work and were angered by the possibility of being labeled criminals. Many had never participated in a protest march before.

"I'm here because I was in the same boat 20 years ago," said Francisco Juarez, who lives in San Pablo and works in San Rafael. "I came here illegally, and turned myself in during the amnesty in 1986. I worked very hard for 10 years and became a citizen. I think everyone should have the freedom to work to build a better life for their family."

Monday's events were part of a nationwide "Day Without Immigrants." Across the country, activists encouraged legal and illegal immigrants to avoid work and school and to boycott businesses in order to show the impact immigrants have on the U.S. economy.

"Not everyone comes here to take," said Angel Rodriguez of San Rafael, who immigrated legally from Spain. "Some of us come to invest in this country."

The protests attracted hundreds of students throughout Marin County. San Rafael schools reported 341 out of about 1,000 students were absent from San Rafael High School Monday, and 125 out of 1,000 were not at Terra Linda High School.

In Novato, 425 students out of 7,400 did not show up for classes Monday, including 170 of the 1,100 students at Novato High School.

However, administrators at both districts said they did not know how many of the absent students were taking part in Monday's events.

"Attending a protest is not an excused absence," said Leah Reich, a public information officer for San Rafael schools.

Many of Monday's marchers carried American flags and some wore T-shirts declaring "We love the USA."

"I may be a citizen, but I'm still Hispanic, and I'm here to help my people," said Ana Orocco of Petaluma. "So many work so hard because they didn't have the opportunity to find a better job where they were from. I hope that Bush will hear our voices, and that he will help us."

A few, however, carried the flags of Mexico or other Latin American countries, and one carried an inverted, or distressed American flag - the same symbol that had angered many when it appeared on a flagpole during a protest in Montebello on March 27.

"We are here to work. We are not criminals," said Angel Aguilar, who carried the upside-down flag.

While the vast majority of Monday's protesters were of Mexican or Latin American origin, they were joined by small groups of union workers, human rights activists, or others of many nationalities who felt solidarity with their cause.

"I'm an immigrant myself, though I came here legally," said Svetlana Nikitina, who moved to Mill Valley from Moscow. "I know how hard it was for me. I can't imagine how hard it must be for them."

Organizers of Monday's events hope to use their momentum to persuade local political leaders to support calls for immigrant rights.

"The next step is to approach our elected officials into supporting our cause, both here in Marin and in the country as a whole," said Carlos Herrera of Mill Valley, a member of the Grassroots Leadership Network.

But even supporters concede that forging a lasting coalition from the diverse group who turned out Monday won't be easy.

"It's a shame, because even here, the Guatemalans hate the Salvadorans, and the Salvadorans hate the Mexicans," said Angel Rodriguez of San Rafael. "What we need is a leader who can see that Central, South, or North, we are one America."
