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Immigrants Stage Protests Across U.S.

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By [MARIA NEWMAN](#)
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Hundreds of thousands of immigrants and their supporters gathered in cities around the country today in demonstrations and an economic boycott intended to show the impact the workers have on the nation's economy as Congress grapples with new [immigration](#) legislation.

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James Estrin/The New York Times

In Queens, N.Y., thousands of immigrants and their supporters today filled the sidewalks and streets. [More Photos »](#)

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On what they dubbed "A Day Without Immigrants," organizers had urged immigrants not to show up for work and not to make any purchases today. But while the demonstrations promised to be some of the biggest in a series of marches during the last two months, not everyone agreed that the show of unity should include walking off the job, forsaking purchases or staying out of school.

In Chicago, Joshua Hoyt, executive director of the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, one of groups that is organizing a rally there, said none of the leaders involved in planning today's rally called for a boycott.

"It's a powerful weapon which needs to be used in an aimed, focused and strategic way," he said.

The impact of the call for a boycott was difficult to measure this afternoon. Some businesses in New York and Los Angeles that are run by immigrants or that cater largely to immigrants were closed, but many others remained open. Casino industry representatives in Las Vegas said few workers stayed out, and most of them had asked for the time off earlier. Chamber of Commerce officials in Washington and its Maryland and Virginia suburbs said they knew of no disruptions.

But while it was still too early to gauge the economic effect, it was clear that the marches were attracting huge numbers of workers and students. The police in Chicago said the crowd at the rally had exceeded 400,000 by late afternoon.

"We deserve what we're asking for," said Francisco Bear, 60, one of the demonstrators in Chicago, who came to this country in 1968 and became a citizen and now owns a truck leasing business. "We love America and we're workers."

In Los Angeles, police were preparing for 500,000 demonstrators at two rallies, but hours before they began, downtown streets were already clogged, inaccessible to vehicular traffic.

Some advocates in Los Angeles have pressed for a full boycott, while other leaders there, including Cardinal Roger M. Mahony, the archbishop, have urged a milder approach.

And as bold as the immigrants have become rallies of the last few weeks, the opposition to illegal immigration has also become more vocal.

However, though scattered counterprotests were reported today, most of the opposition to the demonstrations of the last several weeks has been voiced over talk radio and the Internet, instead of on the streets.

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Truck drivers gathered in a park in Los Angeles, Calif. [More Photos >](#)

Rick Bieseda, co-founder of the Chicago Minuteman Project, said the group was not planning any counter protests in response to today's rally but was encouraging people to "shop until they drop" at American-owned stores today. The group will have a few representatives at the rally to record what happens, but he said they are not planning to demonstrate. "What's the sense of protesting? I mean, we think the whole thing is ridiculous. These people sneaked into our country," Mr. Bieseda said.

United States Senator Barack Obama, Democrat of Illinois, told the crowd in Chicago that many people in the United States do not agree that immigrants deserve many rights.

"There is fear out there," he said. "There are those who want to turn back the clock. We have to reach out to those folks and explain to them that our future will be better together than divided."

In Denver, as immigrants marched down the streets of downtown chanting "U.S.A.," some of them carrying Mexican flags, an angry man on the side of the road chanted back as loudly as he could, "You must go." Another man in a business suit held a sign saying, "Amnesty Encourages More Illegals. Love us or Leave us," but was silent as the crowd passed.

One of the marchers, Maritza Escobar, 29, from El Salvador, said she moved to the United States eight years ago and became a citizen. She said she has participated in all of the immigrant rallies and marches in Denver in the last few weeks, because too many employers exploit undocumented workers.

"I want the employers to treat our people better — pay them better, support them," she said. "Most of the people don't know they have rights, vacation pay or sick time and that's because employers are taking advantage of them."

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Reporting for this article was contributed by Monica Davey and Gretchen Ruethling from Chicago, Kirk Johnson and Katie Kelley from Denver, Andrea Zarate from Homestead, Fla., Steve Friess from Las Vegas, Cindy Chang from Los Angeles, Brenda Goodman from Atlanta, Ray Hernandez from Washington and Stacey Schultz from Seattle.

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