

Tens of thousands march for immigrant rights; Activist says turnout shows 'courage and commitment'

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Body

Tens of thousands of people took to the streets of Milwaukee on Monday to **march** for **immigrant rights** in a national day of action that included withholding their dollars from businesses.

Waving American and Mexican flags, the marchers chanted "Yes, we can" in Spanish and "USA" and **marched** from the city's predominantly Hispanic south side to a park along the Lake Michigan shore.

Alvaro Aleman closed his medical practice in the city to attend the **march**. The 57-year-old native of Nicaragua has been a citizen since 1980. He **said** government officials will have to figure out a way to ensure **immigrants** are treated with respect.

"They have to change. They can't live without us," **said** Aleman, who was wearing his white doctor's jacket and carrying a stethoscope.

The Milwaukee **march** and a similar rally in Madison were part of a national day of economic protest, with some **immigrants** and their allies across the country planning to boycott work, school and shopping to **show** their importance to the country.

Police declined to give an estimate of the crowd in Milwaukee, though organizers Voces de la Frontera estimated some 70,000 people took part.

Christine Neumann-Ortiz, president of Voces de la Frontera, **said** the **turnout** was significant. She **said** some people had been scared last week, when rumors circulated that immigration officials were conducting raids at schools and businesses.

"The **turnout** really was a statement that we're of **courage** and **commitment** — the movement is only growing," she **said**.

The national protest came as Congress debates immigration proposals ranging from tightening border security to legalizing all 11 million undocumented migrants in America.

Jose Garcia, 47, **said** the proposals inspired people to take action.

"I give credit to these people for coming here. They're not doing it to make noise. They're doing it to take a stand. That's powerful," **said** Garcia, who was born in Texas.

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In Madison, police estimated 3,000 people rallied at the state Capitol. Mario Garcia, a 26-year-old student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, **showed** up in a cow costume. He held a sign that read: "We are Wisconsinites too! We make the cheese!"

"We want people to rethink their politics and change their minds," he **said**.

Near the Capitol, a handful of counter-protesters held a tarp with "Enforce Our Law Deport All Illegals" painted on it. A similar handful gathered in Milwaukee.

Parents took time off work and pulled their children out of school to attend the **march**. Rene Espinoza Kissell, 15, took the day off from her Milwaukee high school so she could **show** her support for **immigrants** like her grandparents, who came from Mexico. She packed an apple to eat for lunch during the **march** so she wouldn't have to buy anything.

The Milwaukee school district had at least 2,000 more absences on Monday than normal, but it was unclear whether those absences were because of the **march**, **said** Phil Harris, the district's media manager.

There were significant absences among Hispanic students in the handful of Madison schools that reported attendance numbers, district spokesman Ken Syke **said**.

Some businesses closed for at least a few hours so that workers could attend the **march**. Milwaukee's El Rey chain of markets closed for three hours, **said** part-owner Olivia Villarreal.

The Pedro's Mexican Restaurants in Madison, Brookfield and Wisconsin Dells were fully staffed Monday, though the business accommodated those who wanted the day off for the protest, **said** company owner Jim Martine.

"We're a team," he **said**. "We're all in this together, so anyone who wanted could attend if they so desired."

Eamonn O'Neill, 64, **said** he has tried to become a U.S. citizen ever since he arrived from Ireland in 1965. He hopes the government makes it easier for **immigrants** to become citizens.

"If there is ever a time to **show** the world we are a compassionate people, this is it," he **said**.

Lupe Flores, 66, wrapped herself in an American flag as she **marched** through Milwaukee holding a cross. Flores, who was born in Texas and married a Mexican **immigrant**, **said** **immigrants** make the country better because they do work others wouldn't want to do.

"Every time I see an **immigrant**, I **say**, 'Thank you for doing things for my country,' " she **said**.

Associated Press writers John Hartzell and Dinesh Ramde in Milwaukee and Todd Richmond in Madison contributed to this report.

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