

Latinos boycott; Participation heavy in places, mixed in Georgia

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Body

Illegal immigrants and their American supporters in Atlanta and cities across the country stayed away from work and school Monday in a daylong protest intended to show how vital foreign-born workers are to the U.S.

Organizers called the protest a historic success, as flag-flying crowds filled city parks and streets in most states and the issue of immigration reform dominated talk both in the halls of Congress and on local airwaves.

"We are important to America and America is important to us, said Jessica Alvarez, a Latino community organizer in Washington. "We are asking the nation to give us a chance."

Police estimated 400,000 people marched through Chicago's business district and tens of thousands more rallied in New York and Los Angeles, as well as smaller American cities.

But in Atlanta, the Day Without Immigrants appeared more muted. Though many immigrants said they agreed with the action, many more did not participate in it.

While some schools in DeKalb, Cobb and Gwinnett counties reported high rates of absenteeism, industries that use large numbers of immigrants remained open and reported few employees missing work. A demonstration at the **Georgia** Capitol attracted about 2,500, far fewer than the reported 30,000 to 60,000 that showed up at the Plaza Fiesta Shopping Mall on Buford Highway for a rally April 10.

In Washington, many politicians and pro-immigrant groups questioned whether the May Day demonstrations would cause a backlash.

"The idea was to show the world, or show America, the economic impact of immigrants in this country," Sen. Mel Martinez (R-Fla.) told CNN. "The thing that I hear most often about this immigrant group of people is that they are hard workers, or they're here to work; they want to make a contribution. And **boycotts** is not the right way to go about it."

White House officials said the move could complicate efforts to get comprehensive immigration reform passed.

"The president is not a fan of **boycotts**," said White House press secretary Scott McClellan. "People have the right to peacefully express their views, but the president wants to see comprehensive reform pass the Congress so that he can sign it into law."

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In metro Atlanta, by far the most faithful observers of the boycott were Hispanic businesses in solidarity with the illegal immigrants' cause.

"It looks like it was mostly fuse and very little dynamite," said David Whitlock, an immigration attorney who heads the immigration practice for Atlanta-based Fisher & Phillips, a labor law firm.

Whitlock said several factors contributed to dampening the boycott. Many employers and employees prepared for it by arranging ahead of time for the day off. Leaders of the movement nationwide did not send a unified message. And immigrants feared losing their jobs and/or raids by immigration officials.

Some workers show up

At Carnett's Car Wash in Norcross, all 14 workers reported for duty --- under threat of firing. Acting general manager David Hernandez said the employees, most of whom are immigrants, were warned in advance of dire consequences if they didn't show.

"Everybody came to work," he said, noting that the location in Norcross and another in Lawrenceville were committed to opening Monday.

And if workers were absent? "We'd start looking for new people," he said.

On a typical Monday, between 30 and 50 workers show up eager to work at the Duluth day labor center run by Hispanic Community Support, said Maria Garcia, the director. Fewer than 20 showed up this Monday.

Francisco Lopez of Mexico dropped by, but not to work.

"I have no plans to work today even if they paid me \$500 an hour," Lopez said. "Tomorrow I would go for \$5 an hour."

Jesus Alfonso, a Cuba native who owns a gutter installation business, shut down on Monday. He said he was paying his three employees, who are from Honduras and are here illegally, \$40 for the day off.

"If I make them work today, it's like I'm making fun of them," Alfonso said as he stopped for gas on Beaver Ruin Road. "They are struggling."

Jose Luis Pineda, 37, smoked a cigarette on a bench in front of the South Cobb Dry Cleaners and Coin Laundry. He didn't go to work Monday because the co-worker who drives him to his construction job didn't go. All the five men in his crew stayed home.

From bustle to quiet

Inside the laundromat, several men played pool as they washed their clothes. They all stayed home from work, but didn't see anything wrong with spending a little bit of money on their clothes or at the \$1 per game pool table.

"The idea is to impact the American economy," said Marcos Tulio, 33, a carpenter from Honduras.

At Plaza Fiesta on Buford Highway, only a handful of the 180 stores opened in addition to the mall's anchors, Marshalls and Burlington Coat Factory. It normally attracts between 5,000 and 10,000 visitors on Mondays, but seemed deserted. Manager Arturo Adonay said he left it up to individual businesses to decide whether they wanted to open.

Three of the four Georgia plants operated by Atlanta-based Gold Kist, the chicken farming and processing company, were running close to normal Monday. As for the Ellijay location, CEO John Bekkers said the day's first shift was down by one-half.

"We never knew what to expect, though we were expecting some disruption."

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Bland Farms in Glennville, which claims to be the largest grower and shipper of Vidalia Sweet onions, weathered high absenteeism in the midst of its harvest season.

Owner Delbert Bland said one of his three sheds, which normally is occupied by 60 workers, was vacant. The two other sheds were down a small portion below capacity.

"It's not something that caused us to shut down," Bland said. "We're just running lean."

In Cobb County, school system spokesman Jay Dillon said some schools reported Hispanic absenteeism as high as 35 percent. But of 60 schools, he said, between 35 and 40 reported little or no change, "an improvement over the last protest day," Dillon said.

At the state Capitol rally, many in the crowd waved U.S. flags. A small group sang "The Star-Spangled Banner" --- in English, in apparent response to a flap over a recent recording released in Spanish.

Occasional chants of "USA! USA! USA!" erupted from the crowd.

Some of the signs, and the speakers, invoked the spirit of Martin Luther King Jr. in his hometown.

"This is the land of Martin Luther King Jr.," speaker Rolando Santiago of Atlanta, told the crowd. "Unfortunately, he is not here. But he showed us the way. I also have a dream ... that one day we will all be respected as humans."

Yolanda Rodriguez, Aixa Pascual, Brian Feagans, Julie Hairston, Mike Tierney and Carlos Campos in Atlanta, Lilly Rockwell in Washington and Bob Keefe in Los Angeles contributed to this article.

Graphic

Photo: MARCIO JOSE SANCHEZ / Associated PressProtesters speak up for illegal immigrants Monday on Market Street in San Francisco. Some rallies featured more patriotic themes, but in this West Coast city, signs urging socialism and showing Communist hero Che Guevara were part of the **mix**.

Photo: BRANT SANDERLIN / StaffLuis Capula walks past **Latinos** Music in Marietta on Monday, looking at the sign that says the store is closed for the day. The sign also urges people to unite their "forces" and "voices."

Photo: BRANT SANDERLIN / StaffNot working is one thing; not playing is another. In Marietta, **boycott** participant Marcos Tulio of Honduras shoots pool Monday at a coin laundry. He didn't see it as a violation of solidarity.

Photo: JAE C. HONG / Associated PressIn Las Vegas, some critics of illegal immigration turned out to protest the Latino **boycott**. One of these, Jackie Pinjuv (left), argues with a woman who declined to give her name.

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