

Immigration Rally's Low Turnout Disappoints Advocates; Fear of Backlash, Mixed Messages, Timing Are Cited

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Body

A pro-**immigration** rally that promised to bring tens of thousands of marchers from across the nation to Washington yesterday managed to draw only a paltry number of demonstrators, raising questions about the movement's tactics and staying power.

With fewer than 5,000 people attending, organizers from other localities expressed two worries about the **turnout**: that they were losing the momentum built up by the huge marches in the spring, and that the movement's national organizers in Washington have lost touch with the people.

"I could have told you last week that there would not be that many people," said Ricardo Diaz, an organizer for A Day Without an Immigrant Coalition in Philadelphia. "Our meetings were **low**-energy."

Diaz said that the movement has failed to achieve any gains in Congress since the initial marches and that the people who attended them are **disappointed**.

"What did we have that was new?" he asked. "Why were we doing this?"

The We Are America Alliance of **immigration** rights groups billed the march as a post-Labor Day demonstration to show Congress that undocumented workers still want an **immigration** reform bill that would allow them to work in the country legally.

But, in contrast to spring's huge rallies -- which brought an estimated 100,000 to 300,000 people to the streets of Washington, and even larger **turnouts** in Los Angeles, Dallas, Phoenix and Chicago -- yesterday's march was the latest in a string of protests that drew paltry crowds in the past week.

In anticipation of a crush of people, Metro had planned to start its rush-hour service an hour early, at 2 p.m. But by early afternoon, "there were not enough people in the system" to warrant the extra rush-hour service, and none was added, spokeswoman Lisa Farbstein said.

Fifteen minutes before the march was scheduled to begin, only a few hundred demonstrators were milling before the stage.

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Despite the poor showing, Deepak Bhargaba, executive director of the Center for Community Change, which helps fund and organize the alliance, said yesterday's march was important because it propelled the movement forward.

"I will say honestly that we continue to be amazed that people come by the thousands in spite of raids against immigrants," he said. "This was done without a lot of money and with a whole lot of guts."

It was also done in a climate that has markedly changed since spring.

In the four months since the first marches, competing immigration bills have stalled in the House and the Senate.

The House bill, favored by opponents of illegal immigration, would force undocumented workers currently in the country to return home before being allowed to work. The Senate bill would permit illegal immigrants to pay a fine and gain permission to work.

House Republican leaders made it clear yesterday that they are not about to move forward with any immigration measure that includes a guest worker provision or avenues for undocumented workers to find lawful employment and citizenship. They prefer smaller provisions that would fund border fences, surveillance equipment and tamper-proof identification cards.

"We're at war, and we need to act like it," House Speaker J. Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.) said. "We need to close the borders."

State legislatures, county boards and city governments throughout the country have ratcheted up enforcement this year, enacting measures that restrict illegal immigration and entering into agreements that allow local authorities to arrest illegal immigrants.

Advocates who want to limit legal immigration and clamp down on illegal immigration cheered yesterday's rally turnout.

"The attempt to recreate the atmosphere in the spring has completely failed because the illegal aliens and their supporters have gotten the message that the American people aren't going to roll over for this amnesty bill," said Mark Krikorian, executive director of the Center for Immigration Studies, referring to the Senate legislation.

Grace Rivera-Oven, 37, a Germantown resident who attended the rally in April but stayed home this time, said she fears that the movement has lost some of its momentum, noting that none of the roughly 40 friends with whom she attended the April event planned to go this time.

"I just think people are a little disappointed. Politically, it doesn't seem like we've made a dent" since the previous rally, Rivera-Oven said.

Clara Sabogal, 47, who left Miami early Wednesday and slept in her car at a Virginia rest stop en route to Washington, said she is not surprised that not many people attended yesterday's rally, given the backlash.

"People are afraid," she said. "They've been listening to the news, and they don't want to leave home. Even employers are cracking down."

Janet Murguia, president and chief executive of the National Council of La Raza, the nation's largest Hispanic civil rights organization, said the movement is of two minds.

"I think there have been a lot of mixed messages in the community," she said. "You have people who want to concentrate on marches, and other people who want to concentrate on voter mobilization and education in their communities."

Rick Swartz, an immigration rights advocate, said the timing of yesterday's rally was also at fault.

"It's a Thursday," he said. "People work. Even immigrants have lives."

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