

## **IMMIGRATION PROTEST: 'Let us live in dignity'; Thousands rally against new bills cracking down on illegals**

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

April 11, 2006 Tuesday, Main Edition

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The Atlanta Journal-Constitution  
ajc.com

**Section:** GWINNETT NEWS; Pg. 1J

**Length:** 704 words

**Byline:** BRIAN FEAGANS

### **Body**

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They came waving U.S. flags, wearing white T-shirts and chanting for **dignity**.

And many of the illegal immigrants who marched from the shadows by the **thousands** Monday came with something else in common: a Gwinnett address.

Juan Ballesteros of Lawrenceville and 10 family members from Gwinnett said they wanted to make their presence felt by participating in the 3-mile march through DeKalb County that started and ended at the Plaza Fiesta shopping center on Buford Highway. Ballesteros, a clothing factory worker who has **lived** in the country illegally for eight years, held a sign that read "Awaken Giant."

"We have been working quietly in this country," Ballesteros, 38, said. "But when they called us criminals, they woke us up."

The **protest**, one of several around the country, was part of a national "Day of Action."

The U.S. House has passed a **bill** that would make being in the country illegally a felony and would fund construction of a barrier along much of the Mexican border. Supporters say the legislation would make America safer and help cut the flow of illegal immigrants, whose numbers are estimated at more than 11 million nationally and between 250,000 and 800,000 in Georgia.

The Georgia Legislature last month approved a measure that, if signed by Gov. Sonny Perdue, would **crack down** on illegal immigrants and those who hire them. The **bill** would require state and local agencies to verify the legal status of adults applying for taxpayer-provided services in Georgia. It also would remove tax breaks for anyone who employs undocumented workers.

Dora Aguirre, a real estate agent from Dacula, had both those measures --- HB4437 and SR529 --- crossed out on a placard that read "We Love the USA. **Let** us **Live** With **Dignity**." Aguirre, who is originally from Colombia, said that although she's in the country legally, some of her family members and friends are not.

"Those **bills** are an insult to them," she said.

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The measures also are an attack on Aguirre's bottom line. She caters to home-buyers from Latin America, many of whom have put a hold on plans to buy a house in order to gauge the political climate in Georgia. "Right now, they don't want to invest money in a house here," she said. "They live in fear."

Aguirre said she arrived at 9:30 a.m. and had no problem parking at a nearby Kroger shopping center on Clairmont Road. But for those who arrived a little later for the 10 a.m. march, parking was scarce.

Jose Antonio Moreno said he and about 20 friends and relatives from Norcross had to walk about an hour just to reach Plaza Fiesta. But he made the most of it once he got there.

Moreno wore a golden Aztec costume with a large headdress, and stood at the center of a circle of people after the march, calling out chants to the crowd. First everyone chanted, "USA! USA!" Then someone yelled "Viva Pancho Villa!" calling for cheers for the hero of the Mexican Revolution. That led to a spontaneous recital of the song "Mexico Lindo y Querido," whose lyrics loosely translate as: "If I die far from you [Mexico], just say that I am sleeping and bring me back here."

But the symbol that outnumbered all others at Monday's protest was the American flag. Luis Hernandez, a 20-year-old graduate of Norcross High, was among those waving the Stars and Stripes. "This says we're all created equal," said Hernandez, a house painter originally from Mexico City.

The protest seemed to have a modest effect on businesses in Gwinnett, which had a Hispanic population of more than 105,000 in 2004, the largest in Georgia, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Nora Vazir, who owns a Subway restaurant in Norcross, had trouble keeping up with sub orders Monday because two of her Mexico-born employees were attending the march. During the lunch rush, the line stretched out the door of the restaurant near Buford Highway and Jimmy Carter Boulevard. "A few people came up to the door and walked away," Vazir said.

An Indian immigrant, Vazir said she didn't have a strong personal opinion about the protest. But she respected the decision of her workers, who are in the country legally. "What could I do?" she asked. "They are my good employees. They never miss a day of work."

--- Staff writer Mary Lou Pickel contributed to this story.

## Graphic

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Photo: JOHN SPINK / StaffThousands of Hispanics gathered at Plaza Fiesta on Monday to protest against stricter immigration laws.

Photo: JOHN SPINK / StaffMayde Erez (above) from Mexico watches the march down Dresden Drive on Monday.

Photo: JOHN SPINK / StaffThe Rev. Jose Duvan Gonzalez (left) of the Atlanta Archdiocese was one of several Latino and political speakers to address the crowd.

Photo: JOHN SPINK / StaffEverardo Garcia (far left) from Mexico has been here working construction for five years.

Photo: JOHN SPINK / StaffMaria Rosas (below) from Mexico listens to the speakers at the rally.

## Classification

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Language: ENGLISH

IMMIGRATION PROTEST: 'Let us live in dignity'; Thousands rally against new bills cracking down on illegals

**Publication-Type:** Newspapers

**Subject:** ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS (91%); ***PROTESTS*** & DEMONSTRATIONS (90%); ***IMMIGRATION*** (90%); GARMENT WORKERS (78%); US CONGRESS (78%); FOREIGN LABOR (78%); LEGISLATIVE BODIES (76%); TAXES & TAXATION (74%); APPROVALS (73%); LEGISLATION (73%); FACTORY WORKERS (70%); MANUFACTURING FACILITIES (70%); FELONIES (69%)

**Industry:** GARMENT WORKERS (78%); RETAILERS (76%); APPAREL MFG (73%); FACTORY WORKERS (70%); MANUFACTURING FACILITIES (70%); REAL ESTATE AGENTS (50%)

**Person:** SONNY PERDUE (50%)

**Geographic:** GEORGIA, USA (94%); UNITED STATES (93%); MEXICO (79%); LATIN AMERICA (79%)

**Load-Date:** April 11, 2006

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