

San Jose immigration march has spirited but small turnout amid flu fears and light rain

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Body

Defying worries about a growing swine **flu** pandemic and braving spring **rain**, hundreds of immigrants and their supporters **marched** to downtown **San Jose** on Friday evening, hoping to drum up support for legislation that would create a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants.

"Because people are here, and they have a voice, this is a success," said Martha Campos, a volunteer with Comité Cesar Chavez, a **San Jose** immigrant advocacy group. "It doesn't matter that it's **raining** and people are thinking about a public-health issue. We are here and we're speaking out." Police estimated the three-block long phalanx to be only 400 marchers, while a loose count indicated about 1,000 participants.

The three-mile **march** from **San Jose**'s East Side to downtown City Hall was part of a national push to reform the country's **immigration** system, one that includes legalization of an estimated 12 million illegal immigrants in the United States. May Day **marches** were held in cities across the country.

Dennis Gonzalez, 26, a third-year graduate student at **San Jose** State University, was at City Hall to welcome the marchers, holding up a sign reading "Reform not Raids." "My parents were undocumented immigrants from El Salvador," he said.

"If they had not been given the opportunity to become legal, I would not be here. I came to support." Gonzalez and his friend Laura Cabral, 24, also an SJSU graduate student, dismissed worries about the swine **flu** and public gatherings.

Organizers had consulted county public health officials, who said that there was no ban on public gatherings.

In the background, the marchers chanted, "Obama, escucha. Estamos en la lucha," or "Obama, listen. We're in a struggle." The administration of President Barack Obama has signaled interest in advancing legalization. This week, the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on **Immigration** began hearings on reform, and the federal government also announced plans to focus enforcement on employers and scale back on raids where illegal immigrants have been swept up and deported.

Groups like the Federation for American **Immigration** Reform oppose the call for legalization, denouncing it as a "free pass, an amnesty" for people who have violated **immigration** and criminal laws. It failed in the previous administration under a Republican president, said FAIR spokesman Ira Mehlman, not because of lack of political will on Capitol Hill, but because the American public was against it.

"What has changed is our economic situation: Millions of people are unemployed and states are teetering on a budget abyss," he said. "Talk of amnesty simply ignores all these other realities. We simply don't have the resources."

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Arriving at San Jose City Hall on Santa Clara Street between Fifth and Sixth streets, waving U.S. and Mexican flags, marchers chanted the urgency of reform, legalization, and the importance of reuniting immigrant families split by deportations.

"By marching we hope to send a strong message to Congress and to our president," said Adel Olvera, director of immigration and citizenship program for the Center for Employment and Training in San Jose. "This is still very important to us."

While the march was spirited, it was a disappointing turnout for organizers who had hoped to draw as many as 10,000 participants. In 2006, the same event drew in excess of 125,000. But worries about the growing spread of swine flu, its links to Mexico and the late afternoon rain clearly affected the turnout.

Organizers and immigration advocates also voiced concerns about the "scapegoating" of Mexican immigrants as the source of the swine flu. American and international medical experts have not determined the exact source of the pandemic but some opponents of legalization, calling it "the Mexican flu," have suggested it was brought into the United States by illegal immigrants who escaped border inspection.

"We know that people who like to blame Mexicans are going to blame them for this outbreak, too," said Ruth Robertson, a member of the Raging Grannies, one of the many Bay Area groups that joined the march in support of legalization. "This would certainly be in line with past cases of motivation based on racism and bigotry."

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Graphic

Marchers make their way down Santa Clara St. during the May Day immigration march in San Jose Friday May 1, 2009. Despite worries about the spread of swine flu, the immigration march went ahead as scheduled. The march is part of a nationwide push - immigration marches will be held in cities across the country - to legalize millions of illegal immigrants, an effort that the Obama administration has signalled it will support. (Patrick Tehan/Mercury News)

Maria Valencia and other marchers pause for a moment of silence in front of San Jose City Hall after the May Day immigration march in San Jose Friday May 1, 2009. Despite worries about the spread of swine flu, the immigration march went ahead as scheduled. The march is part of a nationwide push - immigration marches will be held in cities across the country - to legalize millions of illegal immigrants, an effort that the Obama administration has signalled it will support. (Patrick Tehan/Mercury News)

Marchers gather in front of San Jose City Hall after the May Day immigration march in San Jose Friday May 1, 2009. Despite worries about the spread of swine flu, the immigration march went ahead as scheduled. The march is part of a nationwide push - immigration marches will be held in cities across the country - to legalize millions of illegal immigrants, an effort that the Obama administration has signalled it will support. (Patrick Tehan/Mercury News)

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