

Hispanics make their voices heard; Thousands stay home. Work, stores, schools bitten by protest against bill cracking down on illegal immigrants.

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Body

Latino shopping plazas turned to ghost towns, **school** absentees soared and restaurants from Buford to Buckhead closed as **Hispanics** withdrew from Georgia's economy by the **thousands** Friday.

The "Day of Dignity" was hastily arranged to signal the role that **Hispanics** play in Georgia commerce and to **protest** a sweeping crackdown on **illegal immigrants** nearing passage in the state Legislature. Organizers asked Latinos to refrain from buying anything Friday and to **stay home** from **work** if possible.

"We want to show everybody that the strength we have is enormous," said Teodoro Maus, a spokesman for the religious, civic and business leaders who came together as the March 17th Alliance of Georgia.

He called the anti-**illegal** immigration measures moving through the General Assembly an affront to legal and **illegal** Latino **immigrants**.

"We cannot accept it any longer," Maus said.

Maus, a former Mexican consul in Atlanta, could almost see the impact of the no-**work**, no-buy effort as he spoke in front of the El Adobe Mexican Restaurant. The Western Union office around the corner had just one customer, not the usual line of Hispanic workers cashing and wiring paychecks on a Friday. The nearby Centro Norcross was practically empty. And a McDonald's **down** Jimmy Carter Boulevard had shut **down** its dining area, forcing patrons, including some on foot, to use the drive-through.

In Chamblee, Texaco gas station clerk Asif Khan said **Hispanics** normally **make** up half the clientele at the station. But not one passed through during the morning rush hour, Khan said. "I actually have time to read this," he said, flipping through the newspaper.

Atlanta wasn't the only city where **immigrants** were flexing their muscle Friday.

In Phoenix, police said 10,000 demonstrators marched to the office of Republican Sen. Jon Kyl, co-sponsor of a **bill** that would give **illegal immigrants** up to five years to leave the country. And near Los Angeles, at least 500 students at Huntington Park High **School** walked out of classes in the morning. Some carried Mexican flags **down** the middle of Los Angeles streets, with police cruisers behind them.

Friday's events in Georgia came in response to SB 529, which is aimed at **illegal immigrants** and their employers.

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Authored by state Sen. Chip Rogers (R-Woodstock), the immigration bill has passed the state Senate and House. But the chambers passed different versions, and a final bill could be fashioned by a conference committee before the Legislature adjourns.

Rogers' bill attempts to prohibit adult illegal immigrants from getting taxpayer-funded benefits to which they are not entitled. It also attempts to ensure that companies with public contracts hire only workers in the country legally, and it would financially penalize private employers who hire illegal immigrants. The bill also would establish tough penalties for human trafficking.

More than 100 Hispanic high school students took their protest of the measure directly to the Georgia Capitol, waving Mexican flags Friday and shouting "Justice."

Luis Rogue, an 18-year-old who attends Druid Hills High School, said he came with a group of students from Cross Keys High School. "I think this bill discriminates against people who work hard," Rogue said.

He wasn't the only one who left behind an empty desk at metro area schools. More than half the Hispanic high school students were absent from Hall County public schools Friday, the school system reported, including 71 percent at East Hall High. In Gwinnett County, 35 principals reported more Hispanics absent Friday than usual, said Sloan Roach, school district spokeswoman.

Leaders of the March 17th Alliance, named for the day they formed, lamented those absences, saying they never wanted students to skip school. They claimed to have gotten 85 percent compliance with the no-purchase request. Maus asserted that up to 80,000 Hispanics didn't go to work.

Contractor Rick Rickard found himself unexpectedly idle Friday afternoon because four of his five Hispanic employees didn't show for an industrial job in south Fulton County. After 27 years in construction, Richard said he finds the argument that Hispanics are taking construction and other jobs from American citizens incredible.

"I cannot find American people to do the types of jobs I need done," said Rickard, who said he demands proof of immigration status from his workers. "Without them, I might as well shut my doors."

Manuel Garcia's 15-man landscaping crew said they were told they'd lose their jobs if they didn't show up for work. That's why they were busily sprinkling pine straw around bushes and flower beds at warehouses along Best Friend Road in Norcross. "We have families to support," Garcia said.

Riccardo Ullio, owner and executive chef at both Sotto Sotto and Fritti, made his workers' decision easy. He closed the Atlanta-area restaurants as a show of support for the 15 Hispanic employees on his 50-person staff. Ullio, an Italian immigrant, estimated the move would cost him \$20,000. He said the government should focus on ways to legalize workers who risk their lives crossing the border to better their families. "These are heroic people," Ullio said.

There are an estimated 250,000 to 800,000 illegal immigrants in Georgia --- though no one has a precise number. Proponents of a crackdown say they burden schools, prisons and the health care system without footing an equal part of the tax bill. Opinion polls indicate that a majority of Georgians hold similar beliefs.

Even so, the organizers of Friday's efforts said they plan to ratchet up resistance. They'll stage a protest march April 10 at a yet-to-be-determined location, said Julian Herrera, a Norcross pastor and alliance spokesman. The march will be timed with others around the country.

Juan Diaz of Lilburn said the backlash against illegal immigrants has created an atmosphere of animosity toward all Latinos in Georgia. Diaz said that was driven home Friday morning when he called his boss to say he wouldn't be coming in to work. It cost him the furniture-making job he'd had for three years. "He told me," Diaz said, "I hope some ... Mexican gives you a job."

George Chidi, Laura Diamond, Michael Pearson, Jim Tharpe and the Associated Press contributed to this report.

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* A version of this article may appear in today's Metro section.

Graphic

Photo: JASON GETZ / Staff Jeronimo Chabez closes his business, Chabez Electronics, after being open only to do office work, not to sell anything to the public.

Photo: VINO WONG / Staff Grand Mart International Food along Jimmy Carter Boulevard had about 45 people who did not show up for work on Friday.

Photo: VINO WONG / Staff Joey Alers waits at a McDonald's drive-through near Norcross because the dining area was closed for lack of employees.

Photo: JASON GETZ / Staff A sign at Guadalajara Supermarket (top) reads, "Notice: In support of the work stoppage, we will close Friday the 24th of March."

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