

## **30,000 voices, one message at Capitol; St. Paul march for immigration reform is the largest gathering at the Statehouse since a Sept. 11 memorial**

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### **Body**

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Thousands of immigrants packing a rally Sunday at the state Capitol in St. Paul couldn't even hear the speeches. But the message came through loud and clear: We are hard-working Americans, not criminals.

"If we are coming here, it is because we're looking for better lives," said Juan Carlos Anaya of St. Paul, who came to the rally with his wife, Norma, and their three children. "We're peaceful people. We're honest people. And we're helping the economy grow."

Police estimated the crowd at 30,000, making the rally the largest gathering at the Capitol since a memorial service after the Sept. 11 attacks drew about 35,000 people.

The march was part of national campaign that continues today. Organizers are expecting the two days of rallies to draw more than 2 million people in 120 cities. They are urging Congress and President Bush to adopt laws that would legalize an estimated 11 million undocumented workers. In Dallas on Sunday, a crowd police estimated at more than 350,000 marched through downtown streets.

In St. Paul, police said the march was a peaceful family affair. Parents, babies in strollers and teenagers were among the throngfilling the stretch of John Ireland Boulevard from the St. Paul Cathedral to the Capitol.

Even as the march began, traffic backed up on Interstate 94 as streets clogged with buses and cars seeking places to park. Organizers said more than 60 buses brought marchers from several Minnesota and western Wisconsin cities, including Worthington, Owatonna, Austin and Rochester.

Supporters carried U.S. flags side-by-side with those of Mexico, Ecuador, Argentina and other nations. Signs and T-shirts proclaimed, "I am a worker, not a criminal" and "I am a taxpayer."

Archbishop Harry Flynn bolstered the Catholic Church's calls for activism in support of illegal immigrants by urging the audience to defy laws that would penalize charitable groups for helping illegal immigrants. Minnesotans, he said, should answer to a higher law of human dignity.

"Let them throw us all in jail," he said.

The Minnesota Immigration with Dignity March was supported by a coalition of church, labor and community groups, along with immigrant leaders and students.

Speakers included Hmong and African immigrants, but the majority of the speakers and crowd were Latin American. The day emphasized family reunification and comprehensive reform.

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Many in the audience had their own immigration stories to tell, about themselves or their parents or their next-door neighbors. A key goal for them is to see laws that would make it easier for families to visit back and forth across international borders. Since the Sept. 11 attacks, residents of Mexico and Central and South America said, their relatives have waited years to obtain tourist visas for two-week visits.

Anaya questioned why tourists from other countries are allowed easy passage to and from the United States, but his relatives from El Salvador are not. He said he and his wife, Norma, have not seen their parents in six years.

"We are not terrorists," he said. "We're Latino, but we're Americans, too — Central America. The American people are all one."

Fatiha Ahmed of Minneapolis fled violence in East Africa, but in the confusion of battle became separated from two of her four children. She has not heard any news on the fate of her son, who would now be 11. Her daughter Hanuna, 19, is hospitalized in Africa, and Ahmed longs to see her. But Hanuna cannot come to the United States, and Ahmed cannot return to Africa.

"I need immigration laws to help me see my daughter," she said, weeping.

A number of attendees attacked current measures before Congress as piecemeal and likely to increase the victimization of illegal workers. Each change in the law has a cascading effect through businesses, schools and communities and needs to be part of a well-thought-out plan, said Alberto Puga of Richfield.

Even amnesty can backfire if not part of a larger comprehensive plan, said Puga, a former migrant farm worker in California.

"I remember the amnesty of 1989," he said. "The growers paid even less because so many people were coming here. Pay dropped from \$5.50 to \$3 an hour."

The message lawmakers should take from Sunday's and today's marches, one woman said, is entrenched in the idea that the United States was, and still is, a land of opportunity.

"People who aren't as lucky as me should have the same opportunity," said Luz Mendoza, 40, of Minnetonka, who was adopted by U.S. parents when she was 13. "They've been here a long time, and they're good workers. They can bring a lot to this country, like we do."

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•New poll shows immigration pushing toward top of Americans' concerns. •A look at the size of other rallies.

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