

FREEDOM RIDE IS A REMINDER OF OUR HISTORY OF IMMIGRATION TODD MIZENER;

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Body

Crossing the country from several cities, 18 busloads of "**Freedom** Riders" like Federico Gonzalez and Maggie Santos may do what politicians and lawyers cannot -- remove the pall of terrorism cast upon immigrants after Sept. 11, 2001, and put their rights back on the agenda.

Dubbed the Immigrant Workers **Freedom Ride**, 800 immigrants and supporters from around the country will stop at key cities before arriving in New York City on Saturday

"I can't wait to get to Washington," Gonzalez told the New York Times, as she sat on a bus speeding through the New Mexico desert. An ice cream truck driver, Gonzalez boarded the bus in Tucson, AZ. "I'm going to be screaming loud. I just want to make sure they listen to us."

Maggie Santos, who emigrated from Mexico four years ago, boarded a bus in San Jose.

"I have never been to the heartland of America," she told San Jose Mercury News reporter Jessie Mangaliman. "I hope they will listen to my story there."

The individual stories on this remarkable bus **ride** deserve to be heard. They are **reminders** of the proud **history** of American **immigration** and because we need **immigration** policies that reflect reality, not fear.

As with the famous civil rights **Freedom Ride** in the 1960s, the purpose isn't push specific legislation. Instead, there are several goals, including amnesty for illegal immigrants, job protections and restoration of civil rights for detainees.

The labor unions and immigrant-advocacy groups organizing the **ride** hope to attract 100,000 to a rally in New York, but I'd be surprised if they do. The country is still too shell-shocked to embrace immigrants, a fear anti-immigrant groups are taking full advantage of.

"There's something almost Orwellian for people violating the laws of the country to go en masse to Congress to demand their rights under the law," said Ira Mehlman of the Federation for American **Immigration** Reform in Washington.

Orwellian? Excuse me, but if any totalitarian threat has emerged over the past two years, it's the government's panoply of new laws and powers to snoop on ordinary citizens and hold immigrants on the flimsiest suspicion of terrorist activity.

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Of course, there are serious questions on immigration that need a healthy debate in this country. For example, should we change from an immigration policy based on reuniting families to one that fills labor shortages in specific industries? Whatever a new immigration policy might be, we still ought to end the exploitation and shabby legal treatment of immigrant workers.

The Immigrant Freedom Ride will never persuade the hardliners who believe all illegal immigrants ought to be rounded up and deported. But the majority of Americans know that immigration is a complex issue, exacerbated by more by labor shortages here and forces abroad.

The stories of these Freedom Riders are as diverse as you might expect.

Dhel Galwak Jourchol is on the same bus as Mr. Gonzales. Jourchol is a refugee from Sudan with a U.S. law degree, but he said he could not get a job as a corrections officer because he isn't a citizen. Even so, he's not bitter. Quite the opposite.

"I love the freedom here," he said. "I want to take the system here, and someday establish it in my country. We really appreciate what America has done for us, and we will pay you back someday."

(Note to President Bush on post-war Iraq and nation-building in general: One grateful immigrant is worth a platoon of Marines.)

And then there is bus rider Gaspare Aliotti, a sous chef from Monterrey, CA. He's not an immigrant. His father was.

"My family went through a lot being immigrants from Sicily," Aliotti said. "It's important for me to have the contributions of immigrants be recognized."

The Immigrant Freedom Ride may be a one-way trip, but it follows a road that many of us or our ancestors traveled before.

Notes

JOE RODRIGUEZ is a Mercury News columnist.

Graphic

Photo;

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Juan Pablo Chavez, center, leads Freedom Riders in a chant Sunday after rolling into Davenport, Iowa, from Chicago.

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