

50,000 throng downtown in immigrant-rights march

Protesters seek to sway Congress, overhaul policy

By Leslie Berestein

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Tens of thousands of people marched through downtown San Diego yesterday afternoon in support of immigrant rights, waving flags and chanting slogans in what appears to be the largest public demonstration in city history.

Police said at least 50,000 people walked from Balboa Park to the County Administration Center, while march organizers put the number at 100,000. The crowd was so large it spanned Sixth Avenue from sidewalk to sidewalk. Police described the event as peaceful, with no arrests reported.

The sea of flags that filled the streets represented much of the ethnic makeup of San Diego's immigrants: American flags were joined predominantly by Mexican flags, but also by those of Brazil, Guatemala, El Salvador, Peru, Colombia, Puerto Rico, Greece and elsewhere.

"We are all in the same boat," said Marcel Macado, 33, an immigrant from Brazil who marched with several compatriots. "We are all immigrants."

The main focus of the march, organized by a coalition of community, labor and religious groups, was to protest a House bill approved in December that is seen by immigrant-rights advocates and many immigrants as overly punitive.

Among other things, House Resolution 4437 seeks to make it a felony to be in the United States illegally. The measure would also make it a crime to assist undocumented immigrants, estimated to number as many as 12 million.



HOWARD LIPIN / Union-Tribune

Tens of thousands of people marched down Sixth Avenue near Elm Street on their way to the County Administration Center yesterday. Attendance topped that of the largest known San Diego march, a 1994 "March for Jesus" that drew 25,000 to 40,000 people to the waterfront.

A milder immigration package in the Senate that would allow many undocumented immigrants to legalize their status and eventually obtain citizenship hit an impasse last week.

Participants in yesterday's march said they supported a comprehensive immigration overhaul and wanted to show support for immigrants.

“Without immigrants, there is no United States,” said Juan Jose Manriquez, 19, of City Heights, a dental clinic employee and the son of Mexican immigrants, who has been in the United States since he was 5. He was accompanied by a co-worker, Jose Guillermo Gonzales, also 19 and of City Heights, the U.S.-born son of Guatemalan immigrants.

Gonzales clutched small Guatemalan and Mexican flags.

“We're supporting each other,” he said.

Waving a Greek flag along Sixth Avenue as she and a few friends walked over the join the march, U.S.-born Evangelia Kariotakis said she was marching in honor of her family.

“I'm supporting this march because my father is an immigrant,” said Kariotakis, 23, a waitress in Bonita, who wore a sparkly blue Greek flag T-shirt.

The crowd spanned all ages, from babies in strollers to seniors. Several marchers brought pets, including Ken Secor of the College Area, a retiree accompanied by his terrier mix Canelita, Spanish for “little cinnamon.”

Secor, who said he spent years living in Mexico, said he didn't mind the idea of fining people who came here illegally, as suggested in some proposals, but that the idea of making them leave made no sense to him.

“You just can't deport 12 million people,” said Secor, 77. “It would throw the country into absolute chaos.”

Police reported that aside from a couple of minor incidents, the event went smoothly. Two counter-protesters who shouted “No amnesty” at the crowd were pelted with water bottles, police said, and were escorted away. Police also reported that during a rally at the County Administration Center, where the march ended, a couple of eggs were thrown in the crowd.



JOHN GIBBINS / Union-Tribune
Benjamin Cueva, a Veterans of Foreign Wars life member, held a flag at the end of yesterday's march, which attracted members from a range of social and community groups.

Throughout the day, a group picketed on the Harbor Drive side of the county center, opposite from where the marchers assembled.

Waving anti-amnesty picket signs and American flags, many counter-demonstrators said they were concerned about crime, disease and disloyalty, which they associate with undocumented immigrants.

“The crowd we're witnessing here today has no intention of assimilating into our country and becoming loyal citizens,” said Mike Spencer, 55, a Vista resident who was one of about 60 counter-demonstrators. Spencer and others complained about undocumented immigrants overburdening schools and hospitals and making the community dangerous.



JOHN GIBBINS / Union-Tribune

Judy Harper, dressed as Lady Liberty, joined the diverse crowd that gathered for yesterday's march for immigrant rights. The crowd spanned all ages, from babies in strollers to seniors.

Police reported that toward the end of the rally, some walked near the counter-protesters and the two groups shouted at each other. About that time, a male counter-protester in his 60s fainted while walking down some steps and was taken to a hospital, police said.

Despite the highly emotional nature of the immigration debate, police reported no arrests and no other injuries during yesterday's event. Organizers of the march recruited their own orange-shirted volunteer security force of 200 people.

San Diego Police Capt. Chris Ball estimated the crowd peaked at 50,000 and 60,000, the largest march he could remember in San Diego.

Organizers of the march placed the head count at closer to 100,000. Either way, the attendance was far much higher than most anticipated.

“It was amazing, oh my God,” said Jessica Nolan of Justice Overcoming Boundaries, an interfaith community organizing group that was one of the event's organizers. “We had thought it would be around 10,000. We didn't think we could get that many people.”

Along the way, the marchers who started at Balboa Park were joined by several hundred others, including students who had gathered at San Diego City College. About 500 people joined the march after attending a Roman Catholic Mass at Chicano Park, walking through Logan Heights, Sherman Heights and Golden Hill to downtown.



HOWARD LIPIN / Union-Tribune

Members of Our Lady of Guadalupe Church in Barrio Logan carried a cross during Palm Sunday Mass at Chicano Park yesterday. Later, hundreds of people of several denominations gathered outside St. Joseph Catholic Cathedral to join the march.

That group met with hundreds more of several denominations that had gathered outside St. Joseph Catholic Cathedral at Beech Street and Third Avenue. The combined crowd eventually joined the marchers coming from the park.

“Did you see that?” exclaimed Yolanda Salcido, 48, who was registering voters, after glimpsing the crowd about to merge into the march. “It's like a sea of people.”

Salcido was among roughly 100 volunteers signing up voters yesterday. According to organizers' estimates, 5,000 people filled out voter registration forms.

Attendance for yesterday's march topped that of the largest known San Diego march, a 1994 “March for Jesus” that drew 25,000 to 40,000 people to the waterfront.

Other large marches include a demonstration against the Vietnam War in 1970 that drew about 10,000 people and a march against the Persian Gulf War in 1991 that drew between 5,000 and 10,000 people.

“I've been with San Diego Police for 26 years, and I've never seen anything like this before,” Ball said.

Organizers chartered 36 buses, with 50 seats each, to shuttle participants in from the rest of the county. Passengers paid a donation for fare.

Participating politicians included: U.S. Reps. Bob Filner and Susan Davis, both Democrats, who spoke at the rally; state Sen. Gil Cedillo, D-Los Angeles; state Sen. Denise Moreno Ducheny, D-San Diego; National City Mayor Nick Inzunza and Councilman Luis Natividad.

As Cedillo marched along Broadway, he said he had also marched with César Chávez and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and that this march was as impressive as those were.

“What I liked most about this one is that you had grandfathers, moms with their children,” said Cedillo, who has championed drivers' licenses for undocumented immigrants in California.

About 150 officers from at least six agencies blocked off the two-mile route and helped direct traffic while the crowd dispersed. Of that number, Ball estimated that about 30 officers worked a straight overtime shift.

The impact on traffic was minimal, Ball said, because demonstrators some walked home and others used bicycles, trolleys and buses in addition to cars.

Tom Doogan, the trolley system's special events coordinator, said there were some additional cars added for a Padres game yesterday afternoon, but that there was no need to add cars for the marchers.

■Staff writers Elena Gaona, Norma de la Vega and Eleanor Yang contributed to this report.

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