

Wide range of groups moved fast to organize massive demonstration

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Meeting in a small classroom at a local university, activists gave themselves two weeks to see if they could organize the largest march in San Diego's history.

With yesterday's massive turnout, they may have succeeded.

Their biggest challenge was a matter of unification: Could they bring together 30 diverse organizations to work toward a common goal with so little time? They had to meld student groups, established Latino community agencies, churches and unions – a rare convergence in San Diego County.

But after seeing what happened in Los Angeles, where more than 500,000 people marched March 25, local activists agreed to set aside their differences and focus on a common objective: protesting legislation that would make undocumented immigrants criminals and supporting congressional efforts to find a way to make them legal residents.

More than 100 activists from across the county first met March 27 in that small classroom at the University of San Diego. They agreed to organize a march, quickly set the date and then got to work on getting the word out, seeking the support of the Spanish-language media, lining up bus transportation and assembling a volunteer security unit.

“We have a tremendous job ahead of us,” Mike Wilzoch told the group then. He is the director of Service Employees International Union, Local 1877, one of the march organizers. The union represents janitors.

Elva Salinas, 49, a Chicano studies teacher at San Diego City College, was among those who jumped into the effort immediately. She and about 20 of her students had taken part



SANDY HUFFAKER

Norma Chavez, the director of Justice Overcoming Boundaries, spoke at a meeting at Chuey's Café in Barrio Logan last Monday to organize yesterday's march for immigrant rights.

in the “mega marcha” in Los Angeles. The teacher said she participated because she felt the issue had reached a critical point.

Indeed, she predicted that thousands of immigrants, legal and otherwise, would participate in the San Diego march after years of frustration over how they feel they have been portrayed by politicians and the media.

Among the issues she cited: Proposition 187, the 1994 anti-illegal-immigration initiative; and a House bill passed in December that would make it a felony to be in the country illegally and would punish those who help illegal immigrants.

Salinas, a Chicano activist for 25 years, contacted community college student leaders to let them know the local march was being planned. They used the Internet to contact other students from high schools and universities, encouraging their participation.

Banners and buses

By the second organizing meeting, on March 30, committee leaders had identified needs such as money for fliers, banners, buses, security equipment and a sound system.

But nothing would be possible if people didn't know about the march.

Several organizers offered help in spreading the word. A small army, made up mostly of students and homemakers, was tasked with distributing 20,000 fliers countywide at places such as swap meets, job sites, markets and the San Ysidro border crossing.

Representatives of more than 10 churches of different faiths said they would promote the march and assess how many people planned to attend so buses could be arranged.

In Los Angeles, radio stations played a key role in promoting the march. The local committee called a meeting at Chuey's Café in Barrio Logan last Monday to ask for help from the Latino media.

Representatives of popular Spanish-language radio stations responded, saying they would inform their listeners about the march.

As it turned out, immigration policy took center stage in Washington all week long, giving radio DJs and commentators a hook to not only discuss the maneuvers in Congress, but to talk up the march.

On Friday, news spread that a fragile agreement that would legalize some undocumented immigrants had failed to advance in the Senate. Many commentators used the opportunity to remind their listeners of the march.

From the pulpit

By the organizers' third meeting, last Monday night, progress had been made.

Genoveva Aguilar, of the City Heights community agency *Latinos y Latinas en Acción*, had lined up dozens of buses to bring people from North and South County. Five Star Tours and Charter, whose owners include Mexican immigrants, offered buses below cost. Each passenger would have to pay \$6 to help defray the expense.

Other buses were secured to pick up people from at least 15 churches, according to Kevin Malone from the San Diego Organizing Project, which brings together churches from different faiths.

People of several faiths played a key role in organizing the march. For several years, they have formed the backbone of a broader effort involving community organizations to improve the lives of immigrants.

In his three Masses last Sunday, the Rev. Emmett Farrell, of St. Jude's Shrine of the West in Southcrest, spoke about what was occurring in Congress.

He said church people were not opposed to the country securing its borders, rather the way it was being done. He spoke about the thousands of people who had died in the desert trying to enter the country illegally.

One of those responsible for inviting people of other ethnic groups was Su Nguyen. He said he had arrived as a refugee from Vietnam and now works to help his countrymen integrate into the local society.

Nguyen, 32, phoned people he knew, went on a Vietnamese radio show and distributed fliers.

“This is not just about Mexicans,” he said. “It’s about the whole community. And it’s an opportunity to walk together to make a strong, multicultural society.”

Link to voting

On Wednesday, the organizers met for a fourth time to fine-tune their plan.

As she had been from the first meeting, Norma Chavez was on the front lines. She is the 32-year-old director of Justice Overcoming Boundaries, which helps low-income people facing problems in immigration, housing, education and health care.

Chavez was among those who championed the idea of having voter registration tables at the march.

She said that the organizers needed to emphasize that eligible and future voters can have an impact on what happens in their community.

Yesterday evening, she reflected on the heavy turnout as she sat down to have dinner with her family, something she had not been able to do in the frantic two weeks of

organizing the march.

“This has shown us that there's much more to do in San Diego. We need more participation and more leadership.”

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