

# **Business joins May Day reform cry in L.A.**

**Thousands of immigrant workers prepare to march through the city. Business leaders, joined by union and political figures, echo their protest by calling for an end to blanket immigration raids.**

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May 1, 2008**

As thousands of immigrant workers and their supporters prepared to march through downtown Los Angeles today, some powerful new allies -- business leaders -- will be joining the call for an end to blanket immigration raids on work sites.

The Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce, joined by labor and political leaders at a news conference this morning, renewed its call for immigration reform that includes more worker visas and a path to legalization for undocumented immigrants.

Chamber officials will be armed with a new study by the Los Angeles County Economic Development Corp., scheduled for release today, showing that tens of thousands of jobs and millions of dollars in revenue could be lost if continued raids forced businesses to flee the state. They said the government should concentrate its limited resources and enforcement efforts on those companies with a clear history of exploitation of workers.

"This is a landmark moment," said Samuel Garrison, the chamber's vice president of public policy. "Here you have labor, business, local elected officials, immigrant rights activists and leading educators all coming together to say this has to stop.

"The raids are frightening workers. They are worrying employers," he added. "I think it's going to cause a lot of businesses to think twice about coming to Los Angeles."

But Virginia Kice, spokeswoman for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, said officials would not stop enforcing the law. "It's ICE's sworn duty to enforce our nation's immigration and customs law and the agency is going to aggressively pursue that mandate," she said.

In fiscal 2007, the agency made more than 4,900 work-site arrests, a 45-fold increase over 2001, authorities said. Garrison said at least a dozen Los Angeles area businesses have been raided since January, including a Van Nuys manufacturing company in February, where more than 130 undocumented workers were arrested.

The high-profile business backing for march organizers' major goals comes amid a fierce national debate on immigration reform proposals, which have stalled in Congress. The

battle over what to do about the nation's estimated 12 million illegal immigrants has prompted hundreds of state and local legislative proposals, colored the presidential campaign and brought tens of thousands of marchers into the streets across the nation every May 1.

This year, the May Day marches are expected to be smaller -- about 20,000 in Los Angeles -- and quieter. Nationwide marches are still expected to commemorate what has come to be known as International Workers' Day. But widespread fear of government raids, along with the immigrant movement's shift in focus from marches to civic participation and a decision not to push a boycott this year, are expected to dampen turnout, immigrant advocates say.

In Los Angeles, where May Day organizers specifically celebrate the contributions of the immigrant workers who make up nearly half of Los Angeles County's workforce, two major marches are planned. One is scheduled to start in MacArthur Park and the other on Olympic Boulevard and Broadway; the two will converge in downtown Los Angeles this afternoon for a rally at 1st Street and Broadway.

Although march organizers have split in the last two years over whether to urge a boycott of work, school and consumer spending on May Day, they agreed this year to put aside boycott calls in favor of a united front on stopping the raids and working for comprehensive immigration reform, according to Angelica Salas of the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles.

Police are also preparing new tactics to prevent a reoccurrence of the disastrous melee last year, when they injured marchers and journalists in a botched effort to clear out MacArthur Park.

Marchers include some of those injured in last year's MacArthur Park melee, who plan to wear red shirts and walk at the front of the crowd. Doris Ochoa, a 40-year-old janitor and undocumented immigrant from Mexico, is one of them. She said she and her two sons, now 5 and 14, were hurt last year while running from police on motorcycles. Ochoa, who has filed a lawsuit against the city, said she still can't understand why police hurt innocent protesters.

"Why did they treat us like that?" she said. "They acted in a way officials shouldn't.

"It's important to show . . . that we are still standing," Ochoa said Wednesday afternoon.

Acela Aguilar, 37, who has also sued the city, said she plans to attend the rally at MacArthur Park. Aguilar said she is still angry at the police for their actions last year and wants to speak out on behalf of herself and others who said they were injured in the melee.

"The police are to take care of us, to support us, to protect us," she said. "Who are we going to call in an emergency if the police mistreat us?"

Aguilar said she doesn't anticipate any altercations between the LAPD and protesters today.

"They are in the eye of the hurricane," said Aguilar, who lives in Echo Park. "Everyone is watching."

Aguilar said she is also intent on returning this year because she wants to push for legalization for undocumented immigrants. One of her three children is illegal, while the other two were born in the U.S.

She worries about her family being split if she is arrested and deported. Whenever there is a knock at the door, Aguilar said she checks to make sure immigration agents aren't there. Aguilar said she believes she deserves to become legal because she has contributed to the economy for 17 years as a renter, a consumer and a worker.

"If they kick me out, nobody is going to hire me in Mexico," she said. "I am old. I have put in my youth working here."

Victor Narro, co-president of the Los Angeles chapter of the National Lawyers Guild, has been meeting with the plaintiffs all year and said last year's melee left many people injured psychologically as well as physically. He anticipated that dozens of them will return to the park for the rally.

"They want to send a message that in spite of what happened, they are still willing to engage in the fight for immigrant rights," he said.

Maria Elena Durazo, head of the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor, AFL-CIO, said the more visible role by business would add powerful momentum to the cause of immigrant workers' rights.

Last month, Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce president Gary Toebben wrote and visited Homeland Security Department Secretary Michael Chertoff asking for an end to mass enforcement at work sites, , according to Garrison.

The county employment development corporation study, conducted by its chief economist Jack Kyser, analyzed three industries thought to employ high numbers of immigrant workers -- fashion, food and furniture manufacturing -- and found that about 10,000 businesses created nearly 500,000 direct and indirect jobs and produced \$18.3 billion in annual wages. If 15% of those firms left -- and several are being aggressively wooed by out-of-state business recruiters, Kyser said -- the region would lose nearly 75,000 jobs, the report found.

"The immigrant worker built Southern California and the L.A. economy," Garrison said. "At the end of the day, they benefit everyone, whether legal or not."

Meanwhile, school officials in Los Angeles have prepared for possible May Day student walkouts with a broad-ranging plan emphasizing safety over disciplinary actions.

Walking out of school to participate in a march or rally will not result in an automatic suspension. Instead, school staff members intend to accompany student marchers to keep them as safe and monitored as possible. To return students to school, the district has stationed buses at seven locations, including in downtown, Sun Valley, the Harbor area and Van Nuys.

"We're hoping in most cases students will comply with our rules," said Earl Perkins, assistant superintendent of school operations. "If they walk, we'll have administrators walk with them. We try to work with students on exercising their right of freedom of speech."

The district also has distributed curricular material on immigration and other current events. Some schools will host open forums in their quad areas or auditoriums "if students want to express themselves," Perkins said. "The thing is to keep them engaged in school as opposed to walking out on the streets."

By district estimates, 26,000 students walked out on May Day in 2006; 1,575 in 2007.