

Immigration Debate Heats Up

Undocumented Workers Rally as Tough Measures Are Considered

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PHILADELPHIA -- The phones started jumping off their hooks early on that "Scary Tuesday," so named because callers were spreading panic in this city's Spanish-speaking community. They said federal agents were hauling illegal immigrants from their jobs and deporting them.

Osmin Amilca of Guatemala ran home and locked the door. Daniel Tetl of Mexico shut off the lights at work and cleaned in the dark. "It was the craziest day of my life," said activist Peter Bloom, who fielded dozens of calls, including one from a man who said that agents were right outside his front door. "People were literally hallucinating."

Activists say the debate in Washington over the toughest proposals against illegal immigration in recent times was the reason behind the panic. The fear and paranoia were so strong on that Tuesday, Jan. 31, that the Italian Market at Ninth Street and Washington Avenue virtually shut down because illegal immigrants refused to come to work at meatpacking plants, vegetable stands, fish markets and restaurants.

Within the next two weeks, the Senate will decide the fate of tough legislation aimed at restricting illegal immigration.

Pro-immigrant activists are planning an April 10 protest in 10 cities that could pull tens of thousands of immigrant workers from their jobs. A coalition of groups including the AFL-CIO, the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, Catholic bishops, the Day Without an Immigrant coalition in Philadelphia and the U.S. Hispanic Chamber of Commerce will meet today on Capitol Hill to announce their plans.

Organizers hope to build on recent rallies in Washington; Trenton, N.J.; New York; Chicago; and Philadelphia, which drew more than 100,000 immigrants. In addition, activists, churches and labor unions are planning a national "Day Without an Immigrant," hoping to shut down farms, hotels, restaurant kitchens, meatpacking plants and chicken-processing plants on a large scale in places where immigrants work.

Such a day was carried out with mixed results on Feb. 14 in Philadelphia, when about 5,000 immigrants rallied on Independence Mall, according to the activists who organized it. But downtown civic groups said the economic impact was so small that they barely felt it.

"We have not been aware of any large-scale disruptions," said Elise Vider, a spokeswoman for Center City District, a downtown improvement group. "It never rose to a level that we would notice."

Ricardo Diaz, one of the event's organizers, said the civic groups are minimizing the impact. "I understand it in some way," he said. "They have to downplay it. Do they want people to recognize that they're so dependent on immigrants?"

Opponents of illegal immigration were unsympathetic. Chris Simcox, president of the Minuteman Civil Defense Corps, said Diaz and others are not "representing the immigrant community" but rather "representing the illegal immigrant community."

"I'm sorry that they're fearful that we're going to enforce the law," Simcox said. "Maybe that's a sign that they should return home and reenter this country by our rules. Then they would have nothing to worry about. They could hold their heads high."

About 12 million immigrants live and work illegally in the United States, according to a recent study by the Pew Hispanic Center. Analysts say they do so because the rules for entering the country are arcane and out-of-date, and the demand for low-skill workers is immediate.

Hoping to stem the tide of illegal immigration, House Judiciary Committee Chairman F. James Sensenbrenner Jr. (R-Wis.) sponsored tough legislation that the House approved in December.

Sensenbrenner's bill would funnel more money into border protection, policing and electronic monitoring. The bill would also authorize local police officers to question and detain illegal immigrants, work that is now done by federal authorities.

In addition, the proposal would crack down heavily on businesses that hire people illegally and would impose heavier fines and jail time on anyone who smuggles illegal immigrants or helps them cross the desert or otherwise enter the country.

But before a Senate or a House version of an immigration bill has become law, the fear among illegal immigrants is palpable.

On *Martes de Miedo* -- Tuesday of Fear -- men carried half their family savings with them in case they were picked up, Diaz said. Mothers did not go to work for fear their children would return from school and discover that their parents had been deported.

"It was really, really bad," said Raul Castro, who closed his Mexican restaurant for lack of business that day.

"A lot of my friends called. They were telling me that someone two blocks away got picked up, and I said no. A girl called and said she couldn't go to get diapers: 'I have no food for my baby. I'm afraid.' "

Carlos Romero, owner of La Tienda, a large thrift store, said he had one sale -- a 40-cent bag of potato chips -- by 4 p.m. "Nobody saw anything with their own eyes," he said. "I didn't close, but it was an ugly day."

On the following Thursday, Romero said, he sold 12 airline tickets to people who have since returned to Mexico, an assertion that could not be confirmed. "I've never sold that many tickets," he said. "They said they would have to go back anyway."

A week after Scary Tuesday, another incident frightened immigrants. According to activists, a pregnant Chinese woman, Zhenxing Jiang, 32, who entered the country illegally 11 years ago and had applied for asylum, was seized by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents during a visit to ICE offices in Philadelphia in early February. ICE officials say she was taken into custody because her application for asylum had been denied and her appeals had been turned down.

Her attorney said Jiang was shoved into a van and driven to John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York for deportation. The woman's husband, Tien Xiao Zhang, was unaware of his wife's detention until he received a telephone call from her, during which she tearfully informed him that she had miscarried.

Although federal officials were within their rights to take Jiang into custody, Rep. Nydia M. Velazquez (D-N.Y.) has called for an investigation of their conduct, and Sen. Arlen Specter (R-Pa.) has requested that Jiang's deportation be held up. A spokesman for Specter said this week that the senator's office has been told that Jiang, who was released, has received a six-month stay.

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