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Ethnic groups rally for immigrant rights

By **Oscar Avila and Antonio Olivo**

Tribune staff reporters

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In a show of strength that surprised even organizers, tens of thousand of immigrants poured into the Loop Friday, bringing their calls for immigration reform to the heart of the city's economic and political power.

What started as a word-of-mouth campaign, then spread through the foreign language media, grabbed the attention of the entire city by midday, as a throng 2 miles long marched from Union Park on the Near West Side to Federal Plaza.

Police estimated the crowd as large as 100,000, making it one of the biggest pro-immigrant rallies in U.S. history, according to national advocates.

Observers said the turnout could galvanize both sides in the immigration debate, launching a grass-roots pro-immigrant movement while provoking a backlash among those who want stricter controls.

The trigger for the rally was a controversial federal bill that would crack down on those who employ or help illegal immigrants. But the broader message—carried mostly by Mexicans, but also by a smattering of Poles, Irish and Chinese—was that immigrants are too integral and large a part of Chicago to be ignored.

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The rally drew some of the state's most powerful politicians, including Gov. Rod Blagojevich, Mayor Richard Daley, U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin and dozens of aldermen and state lawmakers.

But the men and women who pushed baby strollers and waved homemade signs, the workers who clean hotel bathrooms and landscape suburban lawns, flexed their muscle too.

American flags bobbed overhead while also decorating shawls, placards and the scarf on a baby's head. That dominant motif was set off by the colors of Ecuador, Colombia, Guatemala and, of course, Mexico.

Urgent chants of "*Si, se puede,*" or "Yes, you can," echoed off the walls of downtown skyscrapers, with drums adding a festive backbeat.

Despite the density of the crowd, shoulders and elbows rubbing from one sidewalk to the other, police said there were no incidents or arrests. But the event shut down traffic in parts of the Loop, and snarled the evening commute as marchers competed with office workers for space on jammed trains and rerouted buses.

As they transformed the Loop with their presence, immigrants made a powerful statement elsewhere by their absence.

Without his immigrant employees, a Northwest Side body shop owner gave up and closed for the day. An Italian restaurant in Downers Grove relied on temps to cook and managers to bus tables. High school students walked out en masse. "I have never been prouder to march, to show my commitment to a cause, than I have been today," U.S. Rep. Luis Gutierrez (D-Ill.) told the crowd. "We have brought together the true fabric of what Chicago is, of what our country is."

After a moment of silence for soldiers in Iraq, a young girl led the crowd in the Pledge of Allegiance.

Jose Soberanis, 21, led a group with a poster of Martin Luther King Jr. that he had sketched with his 11-year-old sister, Cecilia. He equated his fight with the civil-rights movements of the 1960s.

"As the saying goes, 'I have a dream.' Well, we have dreams, too," Soberanis said. "African-Americans were looking for social acceptance. That is what we want too."

Hundreds of high school students were no-shows, and officials speculated that most of them attended the rally. At Farragut Career

Academy in Lawndale, about half the 2,500 students walked out after attendance was taken at 10:40 a.m.

Josue Martinez, a Tilden High School senior who attended, said: "We're supporting our parents and our parents' parents, who came here and worked hard. A lot of classrooms are empty today."

Whole shifts of workers left their jobs to underscore the importance of immigrant workers. One server from an Italian restaurant came in his work tie and apron, draped with a U.S. flag. Construction workers, still wearing hardhats, came straight from their job sites. Clerks from the El Guero market in Aurora piled into the store's delivery van, riding on produce boxes.

Alex Garcia and about 10 co-workers from a Joliet commercial sign company rode a Metra train to Chicago's Union Station, walked out to Union Park, and then retraced their steps as they marched back to the Loop.

"Most people don't realize how much work we do, but it's part of their daily lives," he said. "We are putting up all the buildings and cooking all the food. Today, they'll understand."

Crowds stretched back at least 20 blocks from Federal Plaza at one point. The procession was so long that some marchers still hadn't made it to the plaza when the two-hour rally ended.

Sensing the scope of the rally, critics of illegal immigration from around the country had flown into Chicago to support local activists at a news conference earlier in the day.

Sandra Gunn, government relations field associate for the Washington-based Federation for American Immigration Reform, said she hoped politicians would ignore the "display of arrogance and intimidation" from protesters who she said flout immigration laws: "It is our voices that they must heed."

Some bystanders, marveling at the crowd's size, shared similar opinions.

"They have a right to march," said Alicia Corley, an insurance claims adjuster standing outside a Potbelly sandwich shop on Adams Street. "But we can't even take care of our own people without more coming in from other countries. Look at all the homeless in the city. Let's take care of them first."

Rally organizers originally mobilized to fight H.R. 4437, a bill approved

in the U.S. House of Representatives that would drastically strengthen immigration enforcement, including extending a fence along the Mexican border and severe punishment for those who aid illegal immigrants.

They back a competing bill that would provide legal status for most undocumented immigrants and make it easier for legal immigrants to bring in relatives. That legislation, sponsored by U.S. Sens. John McCain (R-Ariz.) and Edward Kennedy (D-Mass), also would expand temporary work visas.

Frank Sharry, executive director of the Washington-based National Immigration Forum, said the Chicago rally would get the attention of Capitol Hill lawmakers. Sharry's first reaction when a Chicago participant e-mailed him photos from his cell phone: "Wow."

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