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APRIL 5 - MAY 3

A day of protest

Millions of Latinos are expected to join boycott today

By Susan Ferriss -- Bee Staff Writer

Published 2:15 am PDT Monday, May 1, 2006

Story appeared on Page A1 of The Bee

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Maria Lopez talks with customer Olga Jimenez, holding her 1-year-old son, Enrique, at one of the family-owned Carniceria Lopez markets. The Lopez family plans to close today. Sacramento Bee/Andy Alfaro

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Maria Lopez will shut down her meat market today for "A Day Without Immigrants" because she knows what it's like to be one of them - an illegal, a Mexican immigrant who secretly crossed the border more than 20 years ago, at a time when Americans seemed not to care.

"The company I worked for then is gigantic now, and we helped them grow," said Lopez, proudly describing how she stooped and sliced through miles of vegetables for one of the United States' top produce companies, Tanimura & Antle of Salinas, which exports to Europe, Asia, Canada and even Mexico.

"The type of American who works at that company knows what we give to this country," said Lopez, who was granted amnesty after a 1986 law, became a U.S. citizen and whose family now owns 10 Sacramento-area businesses. "But there are those who don't work with the Mexican immigrants, who don't know us. They are the ones who don't understand."

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Whether they are citizens, legal residents or undocumented, millions of Latinos are expected to respond to a call for a national boycott of work, school and shopping today, which some have dubbed "The Great American Boycott."

Activists hope the boycott will showcase immigrants' contributions to the U.S. economy and show widespread opposition to proposed laws they believe would hypocritically punish illegal immigrants without owning up to the U.S. role in encouraging them to come.

Rallies are planned in scores of places across the country, from Alaska and Washington, D.C., to Alabama and Pennsylvania.

Police are preparing for hundreds of thousands to rally in Los Angeles while smaller California cities could see crowds fill public squares. Sacramento police are preparing for at least 20,000 to gather at the Capitol.

"I think it's going to be an historic event," said Tom Chelling, spokesman for the Irvine-based Western Growers Association. "I think millions are going to participate."

Today's protest is the latest in demonstrations ignited by the passage of a House of Representatives bill in December that would convert an estimated 11 million to 12 million illegal immigrants, mostly Latino, into instant felons.

Activists hope protests, along with lobbying from businesses, will convince the Senate to pass alternative reforms with an earned legalization for some illegal immigrants and an expansion in work-related visas to fill labor shortages.

President Bush, who backs some form of legalization, has objected to the boycott. Catholic church leaders who have supported previous protests urged immigrants to attend rallies after work and keep children in school. School districts have asked parents to consider that children's absences would cut into funding.

Trade groups that support legalization also oppose today's boycott, because they're concerned it could generate more hostility toward immigrants, especially after

conservative pundits lashed out so vigorously against immigrants who carried Mexican flags at previous rallies.

"I still believe it's a minority of Americans who want the (House) law, but they have been listened to too much," said Lopez, whose family markets are called Carniceria Lopez.

Advocates contend the United States has a history of designing immigration reform that shields employers from responsibility for hiring undocumented workers. While employers must check documents under the last big reform of 1986, no reliable system was put in place for checking documents' authenticity.

Ana Avendano, AFL-CIO associate general counsel in Washington, said that in 2002, the U.S. Supreme Court issued a decision that follows a pattern of punishing illegal immigrants. The court found that the National Labor Relations Act covered illegal immigrants but not an undocumented worker's right to back pay after being fired for union organizing.

"It has given employers a powerful tool" to abuse workers, Avendano said.

Claudia Smith, an attorney with California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation, said, "Illegal immigration is

probably the greatest area of disconnect between what we say and what we do.

"We want nannies. We want landscapers" and cheap food, Smith said. "There's not a single person who doesn't benefit from this in some way."

Despite reservations about today's boycott, trade groups are advising businesses to accommodate workers' desire to protest in some way.

Jose Luis Arizaga, a Mexican immigrant who is now a U.S. citizen, said the company where he works - Silvercrest Western Homes in Woodland - has given the day off to about 350 workers, most of them Latino.

Businesses and some labor unions are joined in an unusual alliance to persuade Congress to fix the immigration system in part by providing more work-related visas. Right now, those who know they can find a job with fake documents pay thousands of dollars to smugglers to get them over the border at great risk.

"We have to face economic reality that our labor force growth is almost flat," said Dave Penry, a Sebastopol landscaper who supports legalization so strongly he agreed to appear in a TV ad sponsored by a business group, the Essential Worker Immigration Coalition, that aired in Washington, D.C., during Senate deliberations in April.

Penry said he met with 40 of his workers last week, and they reviewed the pros and cons of boycotting today. The workers all agreed to a short day so they could attend an afternoon rally.

All his employees have provided work documents that appear authentic, Penry said. But he acknowledges that many landscape workers are undocumented.

"Yes, for one moment of their lives, they did something illegal by crossing the border," Penry said. "But for the vast majority, since that day, they have made a great contribution to this country, and they just want to be recognized for it."

Penry said he runs jobs ads few Americans respond to, pays laborers on average double the minimum wage and the same health-care benefits he receives.

"It's very frustrating to hear people say I'm some cheap jerk who's getting rich off the backs of people," Penry said.

Administrators at Tanimura & Antle, Lopez's former employer, said the company will be in business today but agreed to make arrangements for workers who want to attend rallies, said Carmen Ponce, the company's vice president of human resources.

"These are hard-working people, and we honor them," she said.

The company employs on average 2,300 workers and offers them medical benefits, Ponce said. They are being encouraged to wear white armbands today to show support for legalization.

"I think it's possible," Ponce said about some workers having fake documents. But anyone hired has to present appropriate documentation, she said.

With a good number of immigrants hesitating to skip work without employers' blessing, today's boycott is unlikely to look like the movie "A Day Without a Mexican" and bring the U.S. economy to a standstill. But organizers are confident they'll have a strong turnout.

Whatever happens today, Americans have been thrust into a debate that's divisive and complicated, one that

policymakers believe merits sophisticated discussions about global trade and labor market projections.

In post-9/11 America, "all the House seems to want is punishment," said Michael P. Smith, a University of California, Davis, immigration specialist.

Immigrant activists point out that Mexico's struggling farmers, still a large part of the Mexican population, have lost more economic ground now that the North American Free Trade Agreement has flooded Mexico with U.S. food imports.

"The push factors have to be addressed through real development policies in Mexico," Avendano said. "The pull factors for immigration should be addressed with more workplace and labor law enforcement."

About the writer:

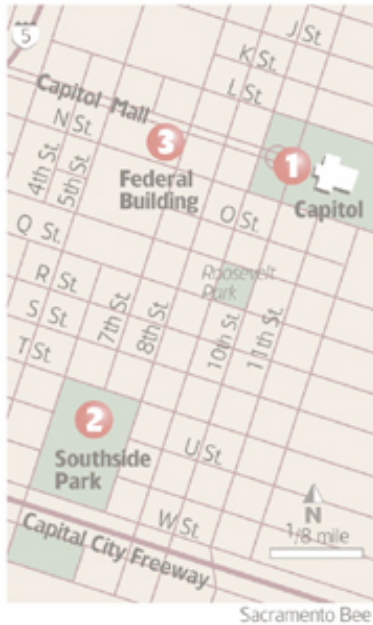
- The Bee's Susan Ferriss can be reached at (916) 321-1267 or sferriss@sacbee.com.



Maria Lopez and her son, Jesus, 8, at one of the markets owned by her family. Lopez was an illegal immigrant until granted amnesty in 1986. Sacramento Bee/Andy Alfaro

Sacramento protests

Protesters will gather at 10 a.m. on the **1** west steps of the Capitol and at **2** Southside Park. Both groups will march to the **3** federal building on the Capitol Mall and back.



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