

## The US Immigrant Rights Movement (2004-ongoing)

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Summary of events related to the use or impact of civil resistance  
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**Conflict Summary:**

The oppression of undocumented immigrants in the United States is an underreported(1) human rights crisis. Twelve million(2) or more undocumented immigrants living and working in the United States are denied basic labor protections, mobility, education, and public services because of their immigration status. Living in the shadows in low-wage industries such as farm labor, hotel, restaurant, and janitorial services, immigrants are vulnerable to labor exploitation, and they face constant fear of being fired or deported. A vibrant social movement in the United States has emerged to protect these immigrants from discrimination and from many cases of excessively repressive enforcement of immigration laws, as well as to advocate for legislation that will provide a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants. Since the last passage of immigration law reform in the 1980s, the movement has grown and demonstrated its power with numerous protests and non-violent actions that since 2004 have captured significant national media attention.

In the spring of 2006, movement activity rose to its highest level in response to anti-immigration legislation passed by the Republican majority in the U.S. House of Representatives. Had this legislation also passed through the Senate and become law, it would have increased enforcement of punitive immigration laws, cut social services and education opportunities for the undocumented, and punished service providers who supported undocumented immigrants. In some of the largest mass protests in U.S. history, over 2 million people took to the streets to join demonstrations against this bill.<sup>3</sup> For example in Los Angeles according to media accounts, over 1 million marched for miles in the largest protest in the city's history. Students organized strikes in which tens of thousands of young people walked out of high schools and universities to register their anger and concern for immigrant rights. And in a broader strike effort, millions of people participated in a one-day boycott during which they refused to go to work, attend school, or patronize stores.

Social movement activity, combined with continued repressive action—such

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as workplace raids, workplace verification, and local enforcement agreements—by the Bush Administration of immigrant communities led to a dramatic shift in voting patterns among Latinos in the United States. As a result of anger over the immigrant rights issue, the Latino voting bloc overwhelmingly opposed Republican candidates during the 2006 and 2008 election cycles.

In 2009, under the Obama Administration, there has been an apparent reduction in some forms of aggressive federal enforcement of immigration laws. However, a workplace raid conducted in Bellingham, WA in February drew a barrage of criticism from immigrant rights activists. President Obama recently announced his intention to seek “comprehensive immigration reform” in 2010. The scope of such a potential reform and the administration’s ability to enact a significant policy change, given heated opposition, will depend to a large extent on the strength and effectiveness of the immigrant rights movement.

### **Political History:**

For many decades, large numbers of immigrants from Latin America have fled economic deprivation and war in their home countries and have entered the United States. The immigrant rights movement consists of a broad array of organizations that work to improve conditions of life in immigrant communities more broadly, and for undocumented immigrants specifically. Key players in the movement include:

- Churches and faith-based organizations
- Small service organizations (such as locally-based centers for day laborers, legal support offices, and ethnic organizations)
- National organizations (such as Fair Immigration Reform Movement, the National Council of La Raza, and National Alliance of Latin American and Caribbean Countries)
- State and city advocacy organizations (such as Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles, and Pueblo Unidos of New Mexico)

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- Trade unions and labor federations (including the AFL-CIO [American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organization], Change to Win, UNITE HERE [United Nettle work, Industrial, and Textile Employees Hotel and Restaurant Employees], SEIU [Service Employees International Union], UFCW [United Food and Commercial Workers], and UFW [United Farm Workers])

These groups provide legal and social services, campaign for better working conditions for immigrants, and advocate for more humane immigration policy on both local and national levels.

Xenophobic anti-immigration organizations such as the Minutemen, who recruit vigilante groups of citizens to enforce immigration policies, have grown in the United States in response to the influx of new immigrants in past decades. Nationalist attitudes that proliferated after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 further fueled the expansion of anti-immigrant groups. Republicans allied with anti-immigration forces gained influence within the government during the George W. Bush Administration. This led to an increase in Immigrations Customs and Enforcement (ICE) raids on workplaces suspected of hiring undocumented immigrants, as well as the push in the U.S. House of Representative to pass enforcement only immigration laws that focus on deporting and punishing undocumented immigrants.

Fearing that such actions, and the national backlash they created among pro-immigrant social movement forces, were causing Latinos to abandon the Republican Party in unprecedented numbers, Senator John McCain and leaders within the Bush Administration proposed a more moderate program of immigration reform in 2007. However, their efforts to broker a resolution failed.

In the absence of national reform, individual states and local communities were left to craft their own programs of enforcement of immigration law. Nearly 200 city and state governments enacted harsh new measures targeting undocumented immigrants. Most notably, in Maricopa County, Arizona, Sheriff Joe Arpaio drew criticism from immigrant rights advocates and human

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rights organizations for his severe enforcement methods. These included deputizing groups of self-proclaimed Minutemen and neo-Nazis to patrol neighborhoods, sweep up individuals suspected of being undocumented (usually identified by the color of their skin), and detain these individuals in desert prison camps.

**Strategic Actions:**

Some of the most well-publicized actions undertaken as part of national campaigns for immigrant rights include:

- An effort in 2004 to jump start federal immigration reform through a nationally coordinated campaign called the Immigrant Worker Freedom Ride (IWFR). This effort was led by labor unions and the charismatic leadership of Maria Elena Durazo, but gathered a large coalition of faith based groups, national organizations, and service non-profits which played a critical role. Participants in the Freedom Ride traveled across the country to publicize immigrant rights issues. When stopped by authorities in Texas, they engaged in civil disobedience by refusing to provide identification or proof of citizenship; the action created a wave of publicity that led to their release from detention within hours. A mass rally of approximately 50,000 people met the riders when they arrived in New York City. This effort created a wave of support from the Latino public, and grass roots activity which was the foundation for future protest activity. However, IWFR did not have any legislative victories.
- On March 25, April 10, and May 1, 2006, the immigrant rights movement held marches in cities and towns throughout the United States, which collectively involved millions of participants. These marches were organized by a variety of loose coalitions of unions, non-profits, and churches that sometimes were competing with each other for participants within the Latino public. The Spanish language press was active in supporting the protest, and most noticeably famous Spanish language radio DJ's lent considerable support. In some cities these were the first mass marches ever recorded, and in many places the marches constituted the largest protests

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in local history. Related student walkouts in Los Angeles, Las Vegas, and San Diego were larger than equivalent actions from the civil rights era of the 1960s. Finally, a nationwide boycott on May 1 demonstrated the economic importance of immigrant communities, idling businesses in targeted areas. This activity dramatically changed Latino public opinion, and the center of debate of immigration reform in the Congress and Senate. In response, the more extreme Sensenbrenner bill passed in the House was temporarily abandoned by the leadership of the Republican Party, and replaced by a more moderate effort lead by Senators John McCain and Ted Kennedy.

- May 1, 2007 witnessed another wave of protests, although there were fewer participants than in the previous year. These 2007 protests were led by mostly the same organizations and coalitions as had led the 2006 protests. A mass march in Los Angeles received substantial press coverage when the police officers stormed the demonstrations and beat dozens of peaceful activists. The continued protest was unexpected by many political analysts, who perceived it as indicative of a permanent shift in the Latino voting demographic away from the Republican party, the likes of which had not been seen since the U.S. Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s.
- In 2008, many immigrant rights organizations engaged in efforts to mobilize Latino voters for the national elections. Efforts included a hunger strike in Los Angeles called “The Fast for Our Future,” which dramatized the importance of voting for immigrant rights. Latinos voted overwhelmingly for Senator Barack Obama for president and played a critical role in the swing states of Nevada, New Mexico, Colorado, and Florida.

Beyond the effort to pass federal immigration reform, local groups have advocated for legislation that would allow undocumented immigrants to go to college (the DREAM Act) and to acquire driver licenses; they have fought for greater access to social services and for legal sanctuary from deportation; and they have worked to oppose measures that increase enforcement of immigration laws. These campaigns have used tactics such as protests, marches, picket lines, petitions, lobbying, and civil disobedience to advance their aims. Although decentralized, these local efforts make up a large portion

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of immigrant rights movement activity, and they engage thousands of people in non-violent action.

### **Ensuing Events:**

Although the major presidential candidates rarely mentioned or promoted immigration reform during their 2008 campaigns, Latinos voted for Sen. Barack Obama in large numbers. Under the Obama administration there has been a notable drop in active enforcement of some immigration laws, with signs that the federal government might entirely stop workplace raids.

Federal government intervention has not yet been used to halt repressive local enforcement of immigration laws. The Obama Administration has also continued to put pressure on employers to fire undocumented employees.

As of early 2009, immigrant rights movement activity continues to flourish, in the form of phone calls, letters, e-mails, and organizing to put pressure on the president and Congress to pass immigrant rights reform and halt some measures of immigrant enforcement that still flourish. These activities aimed primarily to hold President Obama to his pledge to pursue comprehensive immigration reform by the end of 2009. The Obama administration has publicly declared that he will not address immigration reform until 2010.

### **Endnotes:**

- Wikipedia, "Illegal Immigration to the United States," [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Illegal\\_immigration\\_to\\_the\\_United\\_States](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Illegal_immigration_to_the_United_States).  
Ibid.
- Wikipedia, "Great American Boycott," [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great\\_American\\_Boycott](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_American_Boycott)

### **For Further Reading:**

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- Randy Shaw, *Beyond the Fields: Cesar Chavez, the UFW, and the Struggle for Justice in the 21st Century* (University of California Press, 2008).
- Karen Brodtkin, *Making Democracy Matter: Identity and Activism in Los Angeles* (Rutgers University Press: 2007).
- Ruth Milkman, *L.A. Story: Immigrant Workers and the Future of the U.S. Labor Movement* (Russell Sage Foundation Publications: 2006).
- Mike Davis, *Magical Urbanism: Latinos Reinvent the U.S. City* (Verso: 2001).
- David Bacon, *Illegal People: How Globalization Creates Migration and Criminalizes Immigrants* (Beacon Press, 2008). In addition to his book, Bacon, a labor journalist, has also published numerous articles about the immigrant rights movement.
- Journalist Harold Meyerson writes frequently about the immigrant rights movement and the its role in U.S. politics for publications including the *LA Weekly*, the *Washington Post*, and the *American Prospect*.