

Immigrant Rights Activists March on ICE on Day After Inauguration

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Even as the masses celebrating President Obama's inauguration dispersed, a new crowd gathered Wednesday for a day-after march to place immigrant rights atop the president's agenda.

Immigrant advocates know their nativist opponents plan to deploy online organizing and viral communication to counter any attempts at immigration reform this year. They intend to seize every opportunity to build momentum on their side.

The pro-immigrant activists, many immigrants themselves, marched on Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) headquarters to remind the fledgling administration of their demand for a "just and humane" immigration policy.

"It's an opportunity to celebrate, but also to point forward to the great need for immigration reform in the months ahead," said Ali Noorani, executive director of the National Immigration Forum.

Immigrant advocates believe Pres. Barack Obama will stick to his promise to begin work on comprehensive immigration reform in his first year in office. Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano has said the immigration system is "broken." And even before a major overhaul is proposed, activists hope for changes to some of the most criticized aspects of current immigration policy.

These may include the huge backlog in naturalization requests, the workplace raids that have sown chaos in immigrant communities, inhumane detention centers, or the "287(g)" program, which delegates immigration enforcement to state troopers, county sheriffs or local police.

The activists that gathered outside ICE headquarters were guided by interdenominational religious leaders in a "ceremonial cleansing," marking what they hope will be the agency's shift away from what they deem an "enforcement-only" approach.

The event was organized by the Fair Immigration Reform Movement (FIRM), a coalition of state-level and national groups working for comprehensive immigration reform. FIRM also ran an ad campaign on signs atop Washington, D.C. cabs that showed real immigrants' faces and said: "Mr. President, count on me." Also distributed were T-shirts and signs bearing the slogan, "I am immigrant America."

FIRM's blog on Inauguration Day noted that in his inaugural address, Obama "spoke of a country that ensures freedom for all ... Now, it's our time to make sure that the same freedom and the same values include the immigrants of America."

The post-inaugural march is only a beginning. Immigrant advocates spoke about the need for maintaining momentum in the first months of Obama's administration. Though they perceive the new administration as sympathetic and staffed with some prominent supporters of their cause (most notably Director of Intergovernmental

Affairs Cecilia Muñoz, a veteran of the immigration reform movement) they don't want to let their guard down.

Across the country, advocates plan for more actions, coordinated through an increasingly sophisticated communications network, to build a groundswell in favor of reform. For example, on Jan. 22 on Long Island, a hotspot in the immigration wars, the ecumenical Council of Churches plans to release a major statement on the need for "immigration solutions."

High-ranking elected officials, including Republicans, seem to be echoing activists' renewed call for an immigration overhaul, despite the country's economic woes and the failure of an immigration reform law in the U.S. Senate as recently as the summer of 2007.

Condoleezza Rice, former secretary of state, has said the failure of immigration reform, which she considered important to national security, was her biggest regret. Republican senators Mel Martinez and John McCain have both said they feel their party must tone down some members' hard-line rhetoric on immigration in order to be competitive among immigrant voters.

Meanwhile, the office of Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid has placed what looks to be a sketch of a comprehensive immigration reform bill on its list of 10 pieces of legislation with which it hopes to kick off Congress under the new president, according to *American Prospect* magazine.

Any immigration reform package is expected to include some sort of path to citizenship for the country's estimated 12 million undocumented immigrants, even if it is after they are made to wait at "the back of the line" -- behind those who applied through the usual channels.

For this reason, those who favor strict immigration restrictions typically oppose any attempt to change immigration laws, even if the new legislation also includes tougher border security and enforcement measures. They see reform as an excuse to deliver amnesty to illegal immigrants. The restrictionists, as they are known, who are at least as well-organized and politically savvy as the pro-reform activists, have successfully torpedoed past attempts to overhaul immigration by jamming legislative phone lines and inboxes with their petition and letter-writing drives.

The result of this year's immigration wars may come down to which side puts in place the more robust and technologically sophisticated grassroots political network.

Grassfire.org is one online group already established to fight Obama's agenda. It has begun organizing around specific immigration-related campaigns, such as the group's petition to Congress to finish the border fence, with close to 280,000 signatures. Grassfire's omnibus petition declaring resistance to Obama's agenda reads in part, "I resist ... open border anarchy, including amnesty for illegal aliens and promotion of multi-nation 'unions.'"