

United States: Tens of Thousands Strike on Day without Immigrants

Saturday 25 February 2017, by [DiMAGGIO Dan](#), [SINGH Sonia](#) (Date first published: 23 February 2017).



Tens of thousands of immigrant workers struck across the country during “Day without Immigrants” actions, including 30,000 in Milwaukee. Photo: Susan Ruggles (CC BY 2.0)

Arkansas poultry workers, Brooklyn warehouse workers and house cleaners, Twin Cities roofers, and thousands of students in places like Grand Rapids, Michigan, and Charlotte, North Carolina. They were all among the tens of thousands who stayed home from work or school across the country during Thursday, February 16’s “Day without Immigrants.”

The action, largely spread over social media and informal networks in working-class immigrant communities, was a response to President Donald Trump’s promise to dramatically expand immigration enforcement and the wave of raids by Immigration and Customs Enforcement the prior week.

“They’re calling us criminals and rapists,” said Jose Flemate, a member of Roofers Local 96 in St. Paul, Minnesota, who struck with his co-workers. “We’re not like that—we came to America looking for a better life, and we worked hard and built America.

“We want to make sure that people understand that this city would stop functioning if we weren’t there to build, or cook, or clean,” said Ligia Gualpa, an organizer with the Worker’s Justice Project in Brooklyn.

WORD SPREADS LIKE WILDFIRE

In most areas, strikes weren’t coordinated by any organization—and even veteran organizers were taken aback by the scope. “This is a definitely a time when the movement is ahead of organizing,” said Susan Kikuchi, an organizer with the Centro de Trabajadores Unidos en Lucha (CTUL) [\[1\]](#) in the Twin Cities.

“It’s incredibly surprising to get a call saying, ‘We’re 120 workers and we’ve already told the employer we’re not going in on Thursday,’” said Jorge Mujica, an organizer with Chicago-area worker center ARISE.

After getting a number of similar calls from workers who said they’d already asked their boss for the day off and wanted to know where to meet, ARISE decided to coordinate an action. With less than two days’ notice, over 3,000 people showed up at Chicago’s Union Park.

Restaurant worker Jose (who preferred to not give his last name), a member of the Chicago Workers

Collaborative, first heard about the Day without Immigrants on the news. Friends promoted the strike through social media. “People were saying, ‘Don’t go to work, don’t buy anything, don’t go to school.’”

Many of his friends and family members did not go to work. “Everybody was like, ‘We’ve had enough. We don’t really care if they fire us.’” It was the first time he had ever participated in a march or protest.

Flemate also decided to strike after seeing an announcement on social media.

“I said, ‘Look what happened with the Muslim community. They organized in a few hours [after the travel ban],’” he says. “That community got united and showed to the world and the media that they were defending their rights. So why don’t we get united and defend our rights too?”

He was able to convince three co-workers at his roofing company. “The guys said, ‘Yeah, we have bills to pay and we have families, but this is something very important to participate in.’”

Flemate met up with other workers and students in front of the Mexican consulate, then marched to downtown St. Paul, picking up more and more people along the way. He estimated there were 3,000-4,000 people at the state Capitol by 1 p.m.—even though no rally had been called.

In Portland, Oregon, local Latino radio stations announced the strike and encouraged listeners to participate. No one organization took the lead, but there were multiple rallies and many businesses closed down, said Romeo Sosa of the VOZ Workers Education Project, a Portland day laborer organization.

His organization is witnessing widespread fear and panic over rumors of immigration raids, which helped drive participation in the strike. VOZ has set up a raid hotline and is mobilizing rapid response teams.

Fernando Garcia of the Northwest Arkansas Workers’ Justice Center said that most of the organizing in his area was by word of mouth or took place online, mainly through Facebook. He estimated fifty Latino and immigrant businesses across the region, the poultry capital of the world, closed in support.

The center opened its doors for any striking workers to meet and strategize with other strikers. Around 11 a.m., folks started trickling in. Strikers talked about how to get more co-workers involved next time.

“Not everyone went on strike,” said Maria Araujo, who works in one of the local poultry plants. “So we need get more folks involved. As a mother, it’s very important to me to show my children who I choose not to send to school today the importance of standing up for ourselves.”

RIGHT TO ORGANIZE

Organizers scrambled to make sure workers knew their rights. “Having organized strikes in the past, we knew employers would retaliate,” said Kikuchi.

CTUL posted a Facebook image outlining steps workers could take to boost their protection against retaliation. These included communicating to their boss the reason for striking—via letter, text, or e-mail, placing a demand on management, and making clear that workers would return to work the day after the strike.

The Brooklyn-based Worker's Justice Project phone-banked members who organizers knew planned to strike, sharing similar information. "We had a lot of conversations with members about what 'protected concerted activity' was, and also that they needed to connect their strike to the conditions in their workplace," said Gualpa. Under U.S. labor law, workers have the right to organize collectively to address workplace issues, including the right to strike without being fired.

"Tell your boss you're striking not just because of political beliefs, but because of the conditions on your job," said Gualpa. "Tell them your action is an action to improve wages, and to improve health and safety."

The center even suggested that workers post on Facebook their intentions to strike over working conditions—so that if the employer retaliated, they would have proof.

RETALIATION

MILWAUKEE SHUTS DOWN

A massive Day without Latinos, Immigrants, and Refugees on Monday, February 13 in Milwaukee, coordinated by the immigrant rights group Voces de La Frontera, was an inspiration for many around the country. Voces estimates 30,000 people marched downtown, with buses bringing in supporters from 25 cities across the state.

The strike was called in response to the fear that Milwaukee County Sheriff David Clarke, a major Trump supporter, would begin deputizing county police to arrest undocumented immigrants.

After November's election, Voces immediately started taking the temperature of the community via mass meetings. "We were asking people, 'Would you be willing to organize more sustained actions for multiple days or multiple times?,'" says Christine Neumann-Ortiz, the organization's executive director. "The response we got was overwhelmingly yes, and that people were even willing to go further than one day."

The strike was the sixth organized by Voces since 2006. Its success owes in part to the network of churches and supportive small businesses that grew out of another Day without Latinos last year to protest a state bill outlawing sanctuary cities.

Voces is now calling for escalating actions leading up to a national Day without Latinos, Immigrants, and Refugees on Monday, May 1 to demand Trump rescind all of his executive orders on immigration. In the meantime, the organization is building its rapid response network, recruiting churches to provide sanctuary for undocumented immigrants, holding know your rights trainings, and engaging local law enforcement to limit cooperation with ICE. For more info, visit vdlf.org.

Still, over 100 workers around the country were fired for participating in the strike. These include 30 bricklayers in Commerce City, Colorado, 21 workers at a boat building company in Lexington, South Carolina, and 12 line cooks at a restaurant in Catoosa, Oklahoma.

In many instances, however, worker centers and immigrant organizations have been able to bring enough community pressure to get employers to back off retaliation.

That was the case at Chicago grocery chain Pete's Market. On February 15, a worker posted a picture of a letter workers had received from management there, threatening that anyone who didn't show up to work the next day would be suspended for a week.

ARISE responded right away with a letter advising Pete's Market that the workers' action was

protected under labor law. Meanwhile the original post circulated quickly on social media, along with a call for a boycott. Two and half hours later, the company put out a statement that it would be closing six stores for the day, so that workers could participate in the day of action.

Overall, it seems the amount of retaliation around the country was low. Kikuchi said the retaliation was less than what she expected.

CTUL backed workers facing reprisal in eight workplaces [2], following its usual playbook. After determining how many workers are affected, organizers help workers make a plan, which usually involves calling the boss right away. “A lot of employers haven’t dealt with strikes,” said Kikuchi. “We tell them this strike is legal and protected and the community is watching.”

Often, that causes employers to back down. If not, CTUL organizes a group of allies to accompany workers back to work on their first shift after a strike. CTUL has helped workers resolve five of the eight cases this way so far. Three are still pending.

Although CTUL and other worker centers do everything they can to make sure workers will have legal recourse, ultimately, “it’s community support that’s protecting workers and letting them go back to work, not the law,” said Kikuchi.

It’s important to let workers know that organizations have their backs if they do suffer retaliation, said Neumann-Ortiz of Voces, even if they are unable to get their jobs back. “We’ve worked with people to find new work, or to pay medical bills, or to make rent payments. Workers feel like it’s important to tell that story.” Still, she says, the amount of retaliation has been relatively small in the six Day without Immigrants actions the organization has pulled off since 2006.

AWAKENING A GIANT

As the day unfolded, businesses around the country shut their doors and classrooms stood half-empty. In Grand Rapids, Michigan—hometown of new Education Secretary Betsy DeVos—so many students stayed home that the school day will not count.

Isabel Castillo, a Worker’s Justice Center member and housecleaner, kept her son home from school. When she brought him back the next day, “people were very emotional. We felt like human beings,” she said. “We lost a day of work, but we took a big step forward.”

Several organizations have issued a call for a national Day without Immigrants on May 1. These include Voces in Milwaukee, SEIU-United Service Workers West and the Women’s March in California, and the national Cosecha network.

“We believe strongly that the strategy of a communitywide general strike must be an important tool,” said Neumann-Ortiz. “I think immigrant workers have an inherent understanding of their power in the workplace. They know the economic value they produce.”

“The giant is waking up again,” said Mujica. “It feels like 2006. The community is ready to do something, the community is ready to act.”

Dan DiMaggio, Sonia Singh

[Some quotes in this article have been translated from Spanish.]

YOUR RIGHT TO STRIKE

In a Facebook post, Minnesota worker center CTUL suggested sample language for workers who planned to strike:

“My co-workers and I are going on strike to show that immigrant workers are a crucial part of the economy. We want our employers to declare that they will not discriminate against workers based on national origin or religion. We also want our employer to call the White House to oppose Donald Trump’s immigration policies. We are on a one-day strike on February 16, 2017 and we will come back to work the next day, on February 17, 2017.”

“Submit this message by letter, text, or email to your boss,” wrote CTUL. “Keep a copy and document any response you get from your boss. If you are a member of a union, contact your union rep first.”

Workers thinking about participating in similar strikes may also want to consult the NLRB’s Guideline Memorandum Concerning Unfair Labor Practice Charges Involving Political Advocacy, issued in the wake of the mass strike by immigrant workers on May 1, 2006.

For more on organizing collective actions even in non-union workplaces, see “How to Beat Retaliation, Even without a Union” from the January 2016 issue of **Labor Notes**.

P.S.

* February 23, 2017:

<http://labornotes.org/2017/02/tens-thousands-strike-day-without-immigrants>

* A version of this article appeared in Labor Notes #456, March 2017.

Footnotes

[1] <http://ctul.net>

[2] <http://ctul.net/about-us/community-letter-of-support-dia-sin-inmigrantes/>