

Immigrants Rally in City, Seeking Rights

By Steven Greenhouse

Oct. 5, 2003

Tens of thousands of immigrants rallied in Flushing Meadows-Corona Park in Queens yesterday with the hope of promoting an immigrants' rights movement that will capture the nation's conscience the way the 1960's civil rights movement did.

Coming from Mexico, China, Haiti and many other countries, the immigrants are seeking to persuade lawmakers in Washington to, among other things, grant legal status to more than 8 million immigrants.

"America is a land of immigrants; it was built by immigrants," said Roger Toussaint, an immigrant from Trinidad who is president of New York City's Transport Workers Union. "The justice that was extended to the immigrants of the past should be extended to the immigrants of today."

Organizers estimated that about 100,000 immigrants and their supporters crowded into the park, where they rallied alongside the giant steel globe, known as the Unisphere, that was the symbol of the 1964-65 New York World's Fair.

Cardinal Edward M. Egan, the archbishop of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of New York, was welcomed with heavy applause and spoke for 10 minutes in Spanish before turning to English.

"We cannot go on simply ignoring and tolerating the plight of our brothers and sisters," Cardinal Egan said. "Families are being damaged by cruel separation and in all too many instances shameful advantage is being taken of men and women in the work force who do not have proper papers."

The rally was the final effort in a two-week campaign known as the Immigrant Workers Freedom Ride, in which 18 buses carrying 900 immigrants and their supporters traveled from Los Angeles, Seattle and eight other cities to Washington and New York to press their case for immigrants' rights. The effort was inspired by the 1961 Freedom Rides, in which blacks and their allies boarded buses to help end segregation in bus terminals in the South. White vigilantes severely beat some of those freedom riders and firebombed one of their buses.

"Forty-two years later, the freedom riders of 2003, you are going to win," Representative John Lewis, Democrat of Georgia and an organizer of the 1961 freedom rides, told the crowd. "We are one people, we are one family, we are one house, and we are not going to let anybody turn us around. We've come too far."

The rally was in many ways a multicultural festival, with salsa and reggae music, signs in Creole and Spanish, and wafting smells of tortillas and jerk chicken.

The demonstrators called for granting legal status to illegal immigrants, for creating more family reunification visas and for increased workplace protections for immigrants because they are often exploited on the job. In addition, the demonstrators called for an end to civil liberty violations against immigrants, complaining that many law-abiding immigrants have faced harassment and detentions since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

In 2001, the immigrants' rights movement was gathering steam as the Mexican government worked with immigrants' groups and labor unions to persuade Congress and President Bush to grant legal status to many illegal immigrants. But the Sept. 11 attacks derailed that push because the government's focus turned to border security.

Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio of the Diocese of Brooklyn said that the way immigrants have been treated was a blot on the nation's conscience. "They are often ridiculed, exploited and abused," he said to loud cheers. "This must stop, and this immoral system must be changed."

Church groups, labor unions and immigrants groups sent hundreds of buses to the rally, while many demonstrators arrived by subway and car. Chartered buses brought students from Brown, Columbia, Wesleyan, Yale and other schools.

Organizers chose Queens for the rally largely because it has so many immigrants from so many different countries and is widely seen as one of the nation's most diverse counties. At the rally, flags from Colombia, Haiti, El Salvador and other countries waved in the light drizzle.

Marian Thom, who works as a paraprofessional at a middle school in Chinatown, said she came to the rally because, "We need to do more to reunify families. And we need better jobs because immigrants have the lowest-paying jobs."

Organized labor was the rally's chief financial sponsor because unions are hoping to improve relations with immigrants, secure better working conditions and persuade many to join unions.

"The struggle of immigrant workers is our struggle," said the A.F.L.-C.I.O.'s president, John J. Sweeney, whose father was an Irish immigrant. "We believe, as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. believed, that injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

Critics questioned the effectiveness of the freedom ride and Flushing Meadows rally. Mark Krikorian, executive director of the Center for Immigration Studies, a research group that favors stronger restrictions on immigration, said, "The people who would need to be persuaded to support an amnesty for illegal immigrants are Republicans, and busloads of illegal immigrants hijacking the vocabulary of the civil rights movement is not a recipe for currying favor with Republican congressmen."

Many employers, including hotels, restaurants and agricultural growers, support the immigrant rights movements, believing that granting legal status to illegal immigrants would spare employers the risk of illegally employing illegal workers. But critics of eased immigration rules warn that granting legal status to illegal immigrants will merely spur new waves of illegal immigration.

The rally's sponsors have not detailed what legislation they would like to grant legal status to illegal immigrants. But in a rally in Washington on Thursday, the sponsors voiced support for a bill that would grant legal status to more than 500,000 farm workers and to illegal immigrants who have lived in the United States for five years and have graduated from American high schools.

The crowd appeared as a sea of colorful signs and shirts, that said, "No Human is Illegal," "Justicia, Amnestia, Libertad," and "Building Immigrants' Voices and Votes,"

Speaker after speaker said the rally should be the beginning and not the end of an effort, with immigrants stepping up their campaign for expanded rights and protections.

As the bus riders crossed the country, they held rallies in Tucson; Memphis; Birmingham, Ala.; Boise, Idaho; New Haven and 100 other cities.

Outside El Paso, Tex., immigration officials stopped two buses traveling from Los Angeles and threatened riders with arrest and deportation. The riders refused to show their documents, and after a three-hour stalemate, they were released, but only after union presidents, members of Congress and bishops called the Bush administration to ask that the buses be let go.

"People do want to see change in this country that gives everyone a fair break," said Maria Elena Durazo, the chairwoman of the rally. "I think it's a new day for the immigrant community!"

A version of this article appears in print on Oct. 5, 2003, Section 1, Page 33 of the National edition with the headline: Immigrants Rally in City, Seeking Rights. [Order Reprints](#) | [Today's Paper](#) | [Subscribe](#)

