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Amnesty or wall? Issue splits U.S.

April 30, 2006

BY [ERIC HERMAN](#) Staff Reporter

Some want to throw the doors wide open. Others want to build a wall.

Immigration has divided the country like few issues in recent memory. Along the U.S.-Mexican border, a volunteer group called the Minuteman Project tries to stop people from coming in illegally. In cities, hundreds of thousands of protesters fill the streets to declare support for immigrants' rights.

On Monday, Chicago will see its second such demonstration in seven weeks -- a march from Union Park to Grant Park projected to draw 300,000 people.

Rallies also are planned around the country on Monday, May Day, the international holiday honoring laborers.

"It's one of the biggest things to come along since demonstrations against the Vietnam War or in favor of civil rights



legislation," said John Jackson, a professor at Southern Illinois University's Paul Simon Public Policy Institute.

"The numbers of people that the immigrant groups have been able to turn out is unprecedented. . . . The reaction on the other side has been visceral, too," Jackson said.

'Something needs to be done'

On one side of the debate stand those who say immigration makes the country richer, both economically and culturally.

"America's strength lies in its pluralism," said Janaan Hashim of the Council of Islamic Organizations of Greater Chicago, a march sponsor.

On the other side are those who say laws are being broken daily and that immigrants are pulling down wages and draining public resources.

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"Something needs to be done. We can't control our borders," said David Gregorio, a real estate agent in Cary of partial Italian descent.

The issue has erupted because of sheer numbers. The population of illegal immigrants has grown from 5 million in 1996 to an estimated 12 million today, according to the Pew Hispanic Center.

Nearly 80 percent of the illegal immigrants come from Mexico and other Latin American countries.

The problem is that U.S. immigration laws do not meet the needs of businesses trying to get workers or families trying to stay together, said Professor Sioban Albiol of the DePaul University College of Law.

"The system's broken," Albiol said. "It's not meeting our needs. And the question is, how are we going to fix the system?"

There is no shortage of ideas. In December, the House of Representatives passed a bill -- called the Sensenbrenner bill -- that would make it a felony to be in the United States illegally. The measure also calls for putting up fences along part of the U.S.-Mexico border.

The bill played well with immigration opponents. It also galvanized immigrant groups and spurred the marches.

Meanwhile, the U.S. Senate is struggling to pass its own immigration bill. After an initial proposal by Senators John McCain (R-Ariz.) and Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.), the Senate hashed out a compromise that came close to passing last month before it stalled for procedural reasons.

The Senate compromise includes what immigrant groups want: a "path to citizenship." But that very path is what House Republicans and immigration opponents reject. According to them, the bill would reward lawbreaking.

Guest workers or stealing jobs?

"What this is about is disrespect for the rule of law and contempt for the sovereignty of the American people," said Dave Gorak, executive director of the Midwest Coalition to Reduce Immigration.

The Senate proposal would give illegal immigrants who have been in the United States five years or more a shot at citizenship -- provided they stayed employed, underwent background checks, paid fines and taxes and learned English.

Those who qualify would have to work for six more years before applying for legal residency -- a green card -- and pay a \$2,000 fine. Once legal, they would be eligible for citizenship. Currently, people with a green card have to wait five years to apply for citizenship, Albiol said.

Immigrants who have been in the United States two to five years would have to go to a border crossing and apply for a temporary work visa but would ultimately be eligible for legal residency and citizenship.

The Senate compromise also contains provisions to increase border security and expand detentions and deportations.

President Bush has long supported a "guest worker" program that would enable employers to fill some jobs. The Senate compromise would admit up to 325,000 temporary workers annually.

Last week, Bush met with Senate leaders Bill Frist (R-Tenn.) and Harry Reid (D-Nev.). The senators later said a bill could be passed by Memorial Day.

Any legislation that emerges will have to be reconciled with the House bill and signed by Bush.

House Speaker J. Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.) said last month the law that ultimately gets passed will eliminate the felony provisions of the Sensenbrenner bill.

The main sticking point for immigration opponents is amnesty for the estimated 12 million illegal immigrants who would have a shot at citizenship. "The speaker does not support amnesty," Hastert spokesman Ron Bonjean said.

The immigration debate has created strange alliances -- sending the business-oriented wing of the Republican Party into the arms of Democrats and immigration rights groups. Agriculture, tourism and other industries rely on immigrants to staff their businesses.

'Protection of human rights'

The Catholic Church, too, has sided with the immigrant rights groups. Cardinal Francis George will participate in a prayer service at Grant Park in a rally at the end of Monday's march.

Immigration supporters say they are standing up for basic human rights. Mass arrests and deportations would break up families, they argue. And, they say, immigration is as American as apple pie.

"You've got to give credit to somebody who comes here not knowing anyone, not speaking any



English. Their ride is not a smooth ride like somebody raised here," said Charlie Jung, a citizen who came here from Korea 20 years ago and now owns a business, Active Copier, on Devon. Jung is donating a bus to take Koreans to the march.

Gorak said immigration is a different issue than in the past. While the United States used to average about 300,000 immigrants a year, it now gets about 2 million a year.

Opponents also make another argument -- an economic one. Excessive immigration has "decimated the American worker," said Joe Daleiden, an economist and member of the Midwest Coalition. He said businesses "have gone out of their way to hire illegal aliens to undercut the American worker."

According to Daleiden, the average American's weekly wages, adjusted for inflation, have dropped 16 percent, while the American economy expanded by 300 percent. The reason, he said, is illegal immigrants are flooding the market and pulling down the cost of labor.

But immigration supporters cite economics. Immigrants often perform low-paying jobs U.S. citizens do not want, they argue.

Frank Spula, president of the Polish American Congress, notes that Chicago has an especially deep immigrant tradition. "We are a nation of immigrants," Spula said. "This entire rally is staged for the protection of human rights."

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