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Employers Gird for Immigrant Boycott Today

By MONICA DAVEY Published: May 1, 2006

Leading up to a new wave of immigration demonstrations around the country set for today, employers met with workers, posted letters on bulletin boards and in employee lunchrooms, and braced for the day ahead.



Mario Villafuerte for The New York Times Roberto Alejandro, 78, joined in an immigration demonstration Sunday at the Gregg County Courthouse in Longview, Tex.

Some urged their employees to come to work today despite calls for a broad economic boycott as a show of immigrants' strength. Others announced that they would let workers out early to participate in events, or, unsure of just what today would bring, would close for the day.

In Las Vegas, operators of some of that city's biggest casinos urged their employees to come to work and to channel their concerns about immigration into carefully planned and approved alternatives - signing petitions available at work or attending a rally after the first work shift.

In the country's midsection, the owners of Cargill Meat Solutions told some 15,000 workers that beef and pork plants in Iowa, Nebraska, Illinois and other states would close for the day, and, in the case of five of the seven Cargill facilities, open for business next Saturday instead.

The wide range of plans set out by companies in recent days reflected a broader uncertainty about what would actually happen today in scores of cities and towns.

Would large numbers of immigrants stay away from their jobs, from schools and from spending money for what some organizers are calling the Great American Boycott of 2006? Or would more simply attend demonstrations, prayer services and voter registration drives on International Workers Day, as other leaders, who do not support a boycott, have urged?

"A walkout really isn't the constructive way - it's the opposite of what should be happening," said Alberto Lopez, a spokesman for Harrah's Entertainment, the casino company, where prominent banners and petitions calling for immigration reform (to be delivered, ultimately, to members of Congress) have been placed in employee dining halls. But, in the end, no one was certain what workers would choose to do.

Across the country, immigration advocates themselves have been divided over the notion of a sweeping boycott as a method of protest.

Supporters say it would reveal the size of the country's dependence on immigrant workers and remind Congress of the power behind their voices at a crucial time when leaders in Washington are arguing over whether to allow millions of illegal immigrants to become legal. Opponents, though, say a walkout might erode support for the central goals, and could cause immigrants to be disciplined at their jobs and at school.

Predictions for the day varied vastly from city to city.

In Los Angeles, the police prepared for hundreds of thousands of people to attend demonstrations, while smaller rallies were expected in other West Coast cities. Some advocates in Los Angeles have pressed for a full

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boycott, while other leaders there, including Cardinal Roger M. Mahony, the archbishop of Los Angeles, have urged a milder approach.

Jesse Diaz, a rally organizer in Los Angeles, has called on people to avoid buying or selling products, and to skip work or school. He dismisses any division over the question as "wishy-washy."

In an earlier march, Mr. Diaz said, the crowd went "crazy" when he announced plans for the boycott. "You could just tell these folks were ready to boycott," he said.

But in Chicago, where police predicted that the crowd for a rally and march could number into the hundreds of thousands, many demonstration organizers said they were not calling for a boycott.

"We are trying to add on allies and make sure there's unity, not division," said Juan Salgado, president of the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, one of the 250 or so groups involved in organizing.

Instead, leaders in Chicago said their events would focus broadly on immigration reform, labor rights and civil rights, and would include groups — people of Polish, Chinese and Irish descent — beyond the Latino base that has overwhelmingly attended earlier demonstrations.

Over the weekend, too, legal permanent residents were invited to a workshop at a Chicago church where they were advised on the paperwork, English proficiency exams, interviews and other steps needed for citizenship.

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Gretchen Ruethling contributed reporting from Chicago for this article, and Fernanda Santos from New York.

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