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May Day Protest in Santa Fe Attract Immigrant Rights and Labor Advocates by Antschel Siqueiros

Hundreds of community members took to the streets of Santa Fe pushing for immigration reform this past May 1. About a thousand demonstrators participated in the May Day rally in Santa Fe, which is also known as International Worker's Day. Immigrant and labor rights advocates have organized large rallies across the United States for years to make their voices heard. May Day began on May 1, 1886, and is recognized by union and labor groups to commemorate protests demanding the eight-hour work day. Falling on a Saturday this year, a smaller rally of about 300 people was held in Barelmas where a demonstrator said, "We've been pushed to a breaking point. The filth has really hit the fan."

The attendee of the rally was speaking in Spanish about Arizona bill SB 1070*, which has divided opinions and has flamed the fan of discontent in the immigrant community. The passage of the bill has galvanized pro-immigrant right activists and spurred action within the immigrant community in New Mexico. "I'm excited they organized it (right away) when the law was passed," musician Alex Silage said about the evening rally in Barelmas, where he performed along with other bands.

"Es el ao con mas poca gente desde que empezo en Burque. (This year's rally is the least attended since it started in Albuquerque)", Fernando Ortega with the South Valley Economic Development Center said. Another observer said volunteers from El Centro de Igualdad y Derecho in Barelmas, where the rally was centered, have been planning the event for weeks.

The May Day march in Santa Fe set off at 2 p.m. near the DeVargas Mall where activists, organizers, and immigrant rights supporters had already converged by noon. Workers and supporters of immigrant rights greeted the thousand-strong contingent from their businesses and honked from their cars to spur on the demonstration. Demonstrators carried white, wooden crosses representing the sacrifices that the immigrant community makes while seeking a better life in the United States. Some marchers carried an array of placards that called for a boycott of Arizona. The placards ranged from signs demanding full immigrant rights, and a large banner from the ANSWER coalition to shirts asking the question, "Do I look illegal?"

A group of students donning cap and gowns held signs in Santa Fe and in Albuquerque asking for federal action on the Development, Relief and Education of Alien Minors Act. Students and volunteers at the May Day rallies followed up with a Dream Act conference at the University of New Mexico on May 5 and 6. The DREAM Act which has been introduced by Congress, allows students who came to the United States at a young age to gain a path to citizenship, with the condition that they complete two years of college or join the military. The conference at UNM featured panels for students, and workshops advising community leaders and educators on how to help students who potentially qualify for the DREAM Act.

“One of the purposes of our office is recruitment and retention for all students regardless of their status,” Christopher Ramirez, Program Specialist for College Prep Programs at UNM said. *SB 1070 was signed into law by Arizona’s Governor Jan Brewer on April 23. The law makes it a state crime to be an undocumented person in Arizona, and penalizes those who knowingly house or transport undocumented people. The law also gives police unprecedented powers to detain suspected undocumented immigrants. At one point the bill had a provision that allowed a suspected undocumented person to be detained only by “casual contact” with police on the streets, this was before revisions to the bill were made the week after it was signed.

Critics say the law gives vague and unwarranted authority to determine a person’s immigration status, and that state law cannot supersede federal law. Although the “casual contact” provision was removed from the bill, many activists criticize the bill for the harsh criminalization of undocumented immigrants via any minor infraction.