



Legislation designed to criminalize being — or helping — undocumented immigrants propelled millions of protesters to hit the streets this year. This grassroots movement is growing day by day. It's time for Congress to take heed and honor our history as a nation of immigrants.



Demonstrators march on the National Day of Action for Immigration, Washington, DC, April 10, 2006.

Photographers/Getty Images

Starting at 8 am, Araceli Herrera makes a living cleaning homes in some of the country's most stunning gated communities. Herrera, a 45-year-old single mom and grandmother from Mexico City, uses her one-hour bus commute to hand out flyers and talk to the anonymous army — gardeners, domestic workers, security guards, construction workers, day-care providers, and cooks — that builds and maintains the lifestyles and homes of the rich and famous in San Antonio, Texas.

“Many, maybe most, of the people I meet on the bus don't have papers. Some get paid very well. But others get paid very badly,” says Herrera, a volunteer organizer at the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center (EPJC), a community-based organization in the Alamo City.

Some 14 hours after starting her morning bus ride, Herrera's still tearing down the political, legal, and cultural walls of the anti-immigrant fortress that the US has become since 9-11. Herrera and the EPJC organized San Antonio's historic and massive immigrant rights marches of this spring and summer.

“We have no choice,” she says. “Only by marching and organizing can we make people understand how we live, how we are exploited, how we want a better life for our children.”

The San Antonio-based Clear Channel and other mainstream media describe the recent marches as something that “came out of nowhere” in response to the border-wall-building, immigrant-criminalizing Sensenbrenner Bill. But the leaders of these marches — the largest simultaneous mobilizations ever to occur in the US — know that this movement weaves political tradition and intelligence with the great passion that makes history. They understand the difference between the mainstream English media construct of a “new civil rights movement” and the *movimiento*, or Latino rights movement, which is neither new nor solely about civil or even immigrant rights.

Many activists say the movement grew out of the organizing that began with the 1986 amnesty law legalizing three million undocumented workers and then swelled in response to Proposition 187, the 1994 California ballot initiative that tried to deny health and education benefits to the children of the undocumented. Activists also point to the AFL-CIO's recent historic shift to embrace immigrants in its organizing efforts.

But the story of the *movimiento* can also be seen as a grassroots coming-of-age story — the political awakening of a young community (the average Latino is 26) pursuing its ideals of freedom while a veil of national security is being used to disguise radical restrictions of personal and political liberties.

At every step, immigrants have been greeted by hostility, including accusations of everything from being criminals and carrying disease to stealing jobs and threatening national security. Such accusations carry even more weight during times of war and economic crisis. Not surprisingly, immigrants, especially undocumented immigrants, are among the groups most impacted

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by “national security” measures purportedly designed to “defend freedom” — measures that, in the end, sow deeper the fear that prevents mothers like Herrera from driving, or taking their children to local hospitals, or complaining when they are mistreated or exploited.

More than a few opinion-makers have noted how, in the name of defending freedom, right-wing local and national politicians, border-patrolling Minutemen, big- and small-town mayors, and online pundits have gone a step further — demonizing immigrants, school-age youth, and other Latinos at large.

Nevertheless, the *movimiento* marches on, struggling to defend and (re)define freedom in dark times. In the words of one *marchante*, “This is about our right to breathe.”

Here in the US, immigrants fight for that right, shaping the debate and introducing political dialogue around immigration, and a host of related issues, including national security and the economy.

They also send more than \$45 billion to Latin America and the Caribbean every year. With this simple act, the 5-foot-1 Herrera, for example, embodies the global citizen, a role traditionally reserved for transnational corporations, NGOs, and the federal government. By supporting her family beyond the US and sending money to build bridges, schools, and businesses, Herrera fosters conditions that allow people to feel safe and satisfied, forestalling the immigration for which they are routinely denounced.

Perhaps most significantly, these immigrant workers sustain the very way of life they are so often accused of threatening. In fields and farms, cities and suburbs, and jobs of all kinds, they help fuel the national economy. And in doing this, they follow in the footsteps of the many millions who came before them in pursuit of the American dream.

The United States' Latino population is young and growing quickly: By 2050, one out of four people will identify themselves as Latino, according to the US Census. Their presence at the polls is already felt — both in the booth and behind the scenes, where immigrants ineligible to vote helped motivate and mobilize those who could to voice their shared interests. In the words of Herrera, their work and their voices will carry on: *Ahora marchamos, mañana votamos*. Today we march, tomorrow we vote. ➤