

Immigrant Supporters To Counter Bush Speech

New Alliance Ready To Make Itself Heard

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As President Bush prepares to address the nation tonight about immigration, a newly formed network of groups that organized demonstrations for illegal immigrants is conference calling, brainstorming and consolidating its forces so that it can respond to the government with a unified voice.

The We Are America Alliance of 41 immigrant resource groups, unions, churches, day laborers and Spanish-language disc jockeys opposes House legislation that would criminalize illegal immigrants, but it will lobby Congress and compromise to realize its goal of obtaining legal residency for many of the 11 million people who live in the shadows.

But like the president, whose proposal for a guest-worker program is opposed by many in his own party, the alliance does not speak for all. It is being criticized by a small but influential faction of Latino activists in Los Angeles who say the alliance's compromise strategy could slow the momentum created by the protests.

Bush's speech and the immigrant community's planned response on Spanish-language radio will kick off a week of debate and activity over immigration. The Senate is scheduled to take up the immigration issue today, and its leaders hope to emerge with a bill by Memorial Day. Proposed Senate legislation would allow some illegal immigrants to become legal residents. Once a bill passes, senators would begin negotiations with the House, where proposals that would grant citizenship to anyone who entered the country without proper documentation are deeply opposed by Republicans and some Democrats.

Bush's plan to dispatch National Guard troops to the Mexican border was not greeted well by the immigrant coalition, which plans a day of civil action Wednesday, with demonstrations at the White House and on Capitol Hill, and the launch of a nationwide voter registration campaign at churches and nonprofit organizations that hopes to sign up a million new voters among legal residents.

"We expect a large turnout of people from all over the country," Juan Carlos Ruiz, general coordinator for the National Capital Immigration Coalition, said over the weekend. He presaged the message of the Spanish-radio address, saying, "Militarizing the border is not a solution to the problem. We believe that militarizing the border is a propaganda tool. We need comprehensive immigration reform."

Deepak Bhargava, executive director of the Center for Community Change, which helps fund and organize activities for immigrant groups, said the president has to make hard choices. "It's not going to be possible for Bush to thread the needle and create something that makes the right happy" while also pleasing moderates, he said. "We are absolutely prepared to try to bring this thing down if it heads in the wrong direction."

Bhargava's talk is not tough enough for some Latino activists, particularly in Southern California. For them, boycotts and more forceful action are needed to sway the White

House and Congress, and they say the alliance is slowing the momentum built by recent marches and betraying people who risked their jobs to participate.

"When the dust settles, we will see who the leaders are," said Jesse Diaz, an original leader of the March 25 Coalition that inspired the Los Angeles march, which put the immigrant movement on the map. He said that while mainstream immigrant organizations were "complacently ignoring what was happening in Washington" last December, his coalition diverted its fight with the Minutemen in California and Arizona to organize protests against House legislation that would criminalize illegal immigrants and those who help them.

"Where were they then?" Diaz asked of the National Capital Immigrant Coalition, the Coalition of Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles, the National Council of La Raza, the Central American Resource Center, the Service Employees International Union, Catholic churches and other groups that make up the alliance. "Where were the cardinals? Where were the unions? They were complacent and let that repressive bill pass."

Last week, Diaz showed his disdain for people who once were his allies. He walked into a small meeting room in the Rayburn Building and did not acknowledge Angelica Salas, the executive director of the Coalition of Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles. The two played key roles in organizing the big Los Angeles march but are not on speaking terms now.

Salas said Diaz is acting irresponsibly with his negative public statements. "It's okay to have differences. We are totally behind the idea of the immediate right to legal residency," she said. "But we also understand that a community has to build political power to get their demands. We're just trying to be organized and responsible and get the job done."

Diaz said the alliance is composed of groups "with million-dollar budgets," checking into hotels while his crew of representatives was staying with a friend in suburban Maryland, sleeping on a couch and on the floor.

"The leaders are those who continue to work alongside the people," Diaz said.

Other activists say the immigrant rights movement spans a multitude of languages and defies leadership in a single voice. Eun Sook Lee, director of the National Korean American Service and Education Consortium, said Latinos would have a hard time reaching Chinese, Haitians, Africans and others who do not speak Spanish.

"I think a voice will emerge," Lee said, "but it will take time. Many of us have never been tested this way. We have never before seen the scale of our work."

Despite Diaz's reservations, the We Are America Alliance is a formidable ensemble of immigrants rights groups. The coalition took shape around nationwide conference calls that started in February and continue today. Salas said national organizations such as the New American Opportunity Campaign and the Center for Community Change in Washington would call, sometimes at 6 a.m., and she would brainstorm with other activists.

"At first it was going to be, 'We Are Your Neighbors,' then, 'We Are Your Family,' and then, 'We Are Immigrants,' " Salas said. Finally, 'We Are America' stuck.

"We can't rest on our laurels, saying we had these marches," Salas said.