

Tampa Tribune (Florida)

March 7, 2006 Tuesday

Legal Status Not Among Fruits Of Migrants' Labor

100 RALLY AGAINST U.S. HOUSE PROPOSAL

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**PLANT CITY** - This quaint farming town became ground zero Monday in a global controversy about an immigration reform bill moving through Congress.

More than 100 protesters lined the parade route beside the strawberry festival grounds as thousands turned out for one of Florida agriculture's most auspicious days.

Dozens of men, women and children - mostly current or former farmworkers - wore red shirts and carried handmade signs calling for legalization of undocumented migrant workers.

"All we want to do is work here and return to our countries," Blanca Gonzalez announced through a bullhorn to passers-by, many of whom stopped to sign petitions or honked car horns in support.

Gonzalez and her sister, Sylvia Torres, organized the protest two weeks ago, christening their group Immigrants United for Freedom. Both say they were born in the United States and have lived in the Plant City area for more than 25 years.

They say they are speaking for those whose status is less secure. "We're going to be their voice," Gonzalez said.

"We need to stop this law," added Torres, who began picking berries, oranges and tomatoes with her family at age 7. After 20 years in the fields, she now owns an auto repair business.

The bill, HR 4437, was sponsored by U.S. Rep. James Sensenbrenner Jr., R-Wis., and U.S. Rep. Peter King, R-N.Y. It contains provisions that would punish people who harbor or help illegal immigrants, even unknowingly, and proposes fines or jail time for employers who hire workers without legitimate documentation.

**"That's absolutely ludicrous," said Tommy Brock, president of the Florida Strawberry Growers Association. "Putting the monkey on the employers' back - that's not fair."**

**Sponsors of the bill, which was passed by the U.S. House of Representatives in December and is awaiting action in the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee, say the measures are needed to secure the nation's border with Mexico.**

**Brock said that can be accomplished without cutting off the supply of workers willing to do jobs U.S. residents will not.**

**"The Mexican worker is the only people that has come and wanted to do this work in the 25 years I've been farming here," said Brock, who estimates his workers average \$9 to \$10 an hour.**

**He and others are working with the Senate to replace Sensenbrenner's bill with a guest worker program that would enable migrants to be sponsored by employers.**

**"I'm not talking about citizenship," he said. "I'm talking about legal status."**

**Brock said he and most growers he knows comply with current laws that require identification and a Social Security number from each worker.**

**"These people pay taxes," Torres said. "They are paid by check with deductions for Social Security and federal withholding."**

**Proponents of HR 4437 say many of the Social Security numbers are bogus. If that is the case, Brock said, he wonders where the money is going.**

**"The payroll on just my little farm last year was \$860,000. If 15 percent of that was Social Security, where is that money?"**

**Torres raised the same question.**

**It is estimated that nearly 11 million undocumented workers reside in the United States, about 850,000 of whom live in Florida, according to the Pew Hispanic Center.**

**"Who is getting all that tax money?" Torres asked.**

**Tampa immigration lawyer Martin Schwartz said a legalized program with legitimate documentation and taxation would resolve the issue. Schwartz,**

who represented Sami Al-Arian's brother-in-law, Mazen Al-Najjar, when he was deported from the United States, joined protesters along the parade route.

Organizers said they expected 3,000 protesters, but rumors that immigration officials planned to be there kept most away, Torres said.

Another protest is scheduled for March 11 in Tampa. The location has not been determined.

As post-parade crowds flowed into the festival grounds, where the celebration of this year's harvest was in full swing, one man stood at the curb with this sign: "Your berries come from OUR illegal hands."

For information about Immigrants United for Freedom, contact Gonzalez at (813) 763-2309 or Torres at (813) 763-0150.

Reporter George Graham and researchers Buddy Jaudon and Melanie O'Bannon contributed to this report. Reporter Jan Hollingsworth can be reached at (813) 865-4436.