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## Labor Union Officials Discuss Immigration Rights

By Katherine Boyle

Medill News Service

*(Medill News Service) CHICAGO* As the Senate passed a major immigration reform bill Thursday, officials from two large chapters of the Service Employees International Union spoke out on behalf of immigration rights.

David Martino, political director for Service Employees International Local 1, and Cynthia Rodriguez, vice president of Service Employees International Local 73, said their union supports immigration reform.

"We view immigrants' rights as workers' rights," Martino said. "The fight for real immigration reform is about keeping families together and the dignity of all those who work hard and seek to be citizens of this great nation."

A number of Local 1's 42,000 janitors, security officers and property service workers are legal and illegal immigrants, Martino said. And, according to Rodriguez, there are thousands of public service employees in Local 73 who are legal immigrants.

The union's support for immigration reform is remarkable, because, historically, the labor movement has not been pro-immigration.

"Labor unions are actually torn about immigration rights," said Charles Lipson, a political science professor at the University of Chicago. "Economically, they usually benefit from restricting immigration. After all, more workers here only bids down wages. On the other hand, unions must be sensitive to the political views of their members so unions with large numbers of Mexican-American workers must tread softly."

Rodriguez said a large percentage of Local 73's members attended the May 1 immigration march in downtown Chicago.

"[Local 73] represents a number of employees of the Chicago Public School system, so a number of schools virtually shut down on [the day of the march]," Rodriguez said. Although most of the Local 73 employees have documents, "we feel a strong obligation because a number of undocumented [workers] are part of our sister union, [Local 1]," she added.

Rodriguez also said that "the continued abuse of undocumented workers" lowers labor standards for all employees.

"[In] all progressive reforms throughout our history, unions have been there," Rodriguez said, "whether it was public education, . . . health issues, universal health care, we've been there. Any kind of school reforms and we've been there. Immigration reform . . .[is] better for the United States. We're going to be there for the working families."

Not all unions were as active in mobilizing their members as the Service Employees International Union. Galen Munroe, spokesman for the Teamsters Union, said that on a national level, the Teamsters neither encouraged nor discouraged members from participating in the immigration marches. He added that local organizations may have had a different policy.

However, some national unions did take a large role in organizing members to participate

in the marches.

"Not only our members mobilized, but we mobilized the community," said Yanira Merino, national immigration coordinator for the Washington D.C. based Labors International Union.

An official from the Local 881, United Food and Commercial Workers Union, said that, "employers too often take advantage of the status of immigrant workers. Immigrant workers seeking to organize are often threatened and they are scared. It exploits all of use when (employers) do this because they are pitting groups of workers against each other. It has to stop."

The union officials' comments came as the U.S. Senate late Thursday passed an immigration reform bill that grants some illegal immigrants a way to become citizens and also increases border security. he U.S. Senate passed an immigration reform bill Thursday that grants some illegal immigrants a path toward citizenship and aims to bolster border security.

Now lawmakers will try to blend that bill with legislation passed by the House of Representatives which would make illegal immigration a felony.

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