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Boycott blues

Businesses weigh how to handle immigration protest

By **Jon Ortiz** -- Bee Staff Writer

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Ranulfo Flores, who owns Deportes Janitzio in Northgate and Lodi, says he's closing so he and employees, such as Raquel Pimentel Rosas, left, can go to the demonstration. Sacramento Bee/Lezlie Sterling

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A south Sacramento promotional products company that makes shirts for the Sacramento Kings, a day-care center at the University of California, Davis, and a Northgate clothing store that caters to Latinos.

All have grappled with the same question: How should a business handle the impact of today's "A Day Without Immigrants" boycott?

The answer: It depends.

Some are closing shop or paring back operations. Others are closing for the day. Employer associations last week reported that many businesses planned to let workers take a vacation day or sick time to attend rallies and protests.

But many businesses aren't talking publicly about what they have told employees who may want to participate or about strategies that they are using to minimize the boycott's impact. Their reticence is a sign of how vexing the issue is for businesses who fear angering potential customers on either side of the immigration debate.

"Some businesses are going to run skeleton crews," said Kim Parker, spokeswoman for the Sacramento-based California Association of Employers. "I think a lot of businesses are handling it on a case-by-case basis. It's just one day, and everybody can figure out how to get by for one day."

Rallies are planned nationwide today, including one at 10 a.m. in Sacramento at the Capitol, to oppose federal proposals that would ramp up immigration enforcement and make being an undocumented worker a felony. Organizers also have asked supporters to avoid spending money at local businesses and to take the day off from work and school to demonstrate immigrants' economic power.

Until this year, the loudest voices talking about immigration belonged to anti-illegal immigration groups who ran civilian border patrols and rallied for tighter enforcement. That changed last month when protesters nationwide took to the streets in opposition to controversial legislation approved by the House of Representatives that would, among other things, make it a felony to be in the country illegally.

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Immigrant-rights organizations, business groups and labor unions - including the U.S. Hispanic Chamber of Commerce and the Service Employees International Union - pushed back, calling for amnesty for undocumented immigrants. Some also want higher pay and benefits for all workers.

The call for a boycott put John Hillis in a tough spot. About 40 percent of the 70 people he employs at his four Davis day-care centers are Latino - all documented to work, he said - and many planned to take today off.

After talking to managers and staff, Hillis decided to leave three of his centers open today, but he'll close the one at UC Davis that principally serves children of parents who work on campus.

"A vast number of my employees there got back to me and said they were planning to take the day off to support their community," Hillis said. "There was no way that I could operate. Now 95 families have no child care for the day."

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, foreign-born workers accounted for about 15 percent of the U.S. work force last year. Of those, about half were Latino. Up to 12 million workers are in the country without documentation, according to federal estimates.

A survey of 620 California businesses last week revealed that 42 percent suspect their staffing levels will be affected by today's boycott, but 85 percent said they will conduct business as usual the best they can.

About 23 percent received a higher-than-average number of requests for the day off, according to the survey conducted by Employers Group, a human resources management association for California employers. Despite that, 87 percent said that they would enforce their absenteeism policies.

At Golden State Promotional on Alpine Avenue in Sacramento, Raul Navarro pondered last week whether to close shop or trim his six-person staff for the day. His promotional clothing and trinkets business operates under crushing deadlines on short-notice orders, and that makes planning time off nearly impossible.

On Friday, Golden State delivered an order of 400 Sacramento Kings T-shirts to Arco Arena for that night's playoff basketball game. The company produced the shirts in two days.

"It's hard to know what I'm going to do Monday because of the way our business works," Navarro said. "We're thinking about closing for the day, but I'll have to see what's going on. We're a small business, and we need everyone here if we get orders."

Ranulfo Flores is closing his business for the day. The former undocumented farmworker received amnesty nearly 20 years ago and now owns two Deportes Janitzio sports and Western clothing stores in Northgate and Lodi. His family and three other employees work at the stores.

"We're all going to the Capitol rally," Flores said.

Many employers are offering compromises in hopes of avoiding a paralyzing walkout today.

In Southern California, Northeast Valley Health Corp.'s 600-plus employees can get a free breakfast and preprinted postcards to write personal notes about the immigration issue to elected officials.

"Almost three-quarters of our staff, from doctors on down, are Latino," said center spokeswoman Julie Cha. "I think they appreciate that we're sensitive to their concerns and working with them on this."

Roseville-based Huppe Landscape Co. Inc., with field offices in Fairfield and Rancho Cordova, hired extra help last week and worked overtime and on Saturday to compensate for an anticipated shortage of workers today.

"We've required all our guys to file paperwork for a sick day through our human resources departments," said owner Chris Huppe.

Locally, the Sacramento Central Labor Council, the California Restaurant Association and the Labor Council for Latin American Advancement are among the groups supporting today's Capitol march.

"We want an effective way to recruit workers when the U.S. work force supply doesn't meet demand," said California Restaurant Association spokeswoman Lara Dunbar. "It needs to include a pathway to citizenship. Enforcement where we only kick people out of the country will create disruptions for the restaurant industry."

Other groups sidestepped the volatile issue and focused on handling the effects of today's boycott.

"Our association doesn't have a position on this," said Larry Rohlfes, assistant executive director for the California Landscape Contractors Association. "Instead, we're urging members not to take a knee-jerk reaction to workers who want time off and suggesting that companies follow established policies for sick time and vacation time."

About the writer:

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Ranulfo Flores, himself a former undocumented worker who received amnesty, is closing his two stores in Northgate and Lodi so he and his employees can participate in a demonstration Monday at the Capitol. Sacramento Bee/Lezlie Sterling

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