

Posted on Tue, May. 02, 2006

Most businesses supportive of rallies

Some close for the day as others give workers time off, but economic impact of East Bay marches hard to gauge

By Blanca Torres
CONTRA COSTA TIMES

Thomas Raeth usually sits in an office while running his landscaping business, but found himself blowing leaves on a client's yard Monday morning.

Two of Raeth's three employees asked for the day off to participate in a nationwide boycott to demonstrate the economic force of the nation's immigrants.

"I was on the end of a leaf blower taking care of what one of my workers would've been doing," said Raeth, owner of Lafayette Tree and Landscape Inc. "You still have to take care of business. ... Today in support, I said, 'I'll show up and cover.'"

Businesses like Raeth's across the East Bay found themselves scrambling to staff their operations or they closed down completely because of the one-day boycott.

Some business owners, especially those in service industries such as landscaping and food, prepared in advance for the boycott by rearranging their schedules and allowing workers time off to attend rallies and other protest events.

Parry Tong, co-owner of Il Postino, said his restaurant functioned with fewer staff members than usual Monday because various workers asked for a day off.

"For our employees that wanted to go, we said go ahead," he said. "We support them."

Many employers said they offered workers the option of taking the day off without penalty and just asked to know in advance who would be coming to work Monday.

"Missing Monday lunch for an important topic was worth it to us," said John Walz, owner of Va de Vi. "We support immigration reform."

Other businesses such as Max's Restaurant in San Ramon posted signs outside their doors saying they were closed in support of their workers. Restaurants across the region also closed or opened only part of the day, including Va de Vi and Prima in Walnut Creek.

Dozens of businesses along the Monument Corridor in Concord, an area with a large number of Latino residents, were closed including a Wendy's restaurant, numerous tacquerias and Latino shops.

A similar slowdown was reported from other parts of the East Bay. The dozens of Latino-owned businesses on 23rd Street in Richmond, for example, are usually bustling with activity. But on Monday, traffic was eerily light and the sidewalks were nearly empty of pedestrians.

Despite the pronouncement "open seven days!" boldly painted on the parking lot wall of the popular Portumex Restaurant, the eatery was closed as were butcher shops, beauty parlors, auto dealerships and grocery stores.

Pedro Alvarado, 20, was walking down 23rd Street with a Mexican flag draped over his shoulders. Alvarado, a house painter, had taken the day off to join the demonstrations in San Francisco. He said that most of his family members and friends had also taken the day off.

"Everybody is going to San Francisco or staying home," he said. "It is an important day. All the Latinos are together."

As a thank-you gesture, managers at the Motel 6 in Pleasanton bought pizza for their largely Latino housekeeping staff, most or all of whom came to work Monday. Across town, the Don Memo Mexican Market on Spring Street was closed.

The actual impact of the boycott on the economy was difficult to gauge and was based primarily on anecdotal accounts.

One group, however, did survey its members, primarily small businesses employing 50 to 100 workers, to determine how their operations were affected. The survey by the California Association of Employers got responses from about 100 members representing a broad spectrum of industries.

"The numbers from our responses show the impact was very low," said Kim Parker, executive vice president with the association, which has about 500 members.

About 96 percent of the employers who responded said their operations were running as usual. About 3 percent said they were running a skeleton crew with significantly reduced staffing. A complete shutdown of operations for the day was reported by 1 percent of the respondents, Parker said.

Some businesses saw a decline in customer traffic or had other problems.

"We staffed as if it were a normal Monday, (but) it's not a normal Monday," said Chris Hedges, general manager of a restaurant in downtown Walnut Creek.

The restaurant had about 10 percent fewer customers than on a typical Monday and ran out of lettuce despite ordering three days' worth of produce in advance, as it does for holidays. A manager had to run to a local farmer's market to buy more.

Various employers said they want to see immigration laws improved as much as immigrants do to widen their pool of workers.

"(Immigration policy) is not allowing my business to grow," Raeth said. The landscaping industry is predominantly staffed by immigrants, but finding workers with legitimate documents is difficult.

Raeth, whose parents were German immigrants and whose wife is from Munich, said he has written letters to help his employees gain residency in the United States, a process that can take several years to complete. He would like to see a policy that would not criminalize immigration status and would speed up legalization procedures.

"I think it is important for the nation to understand that if we do not do something about this problem, not only are our costs going to continue to rise," Raeth said, "but we still have 11 million people out there."

John Geluardi, Samuel Richards and George Avalos contributed to this story. Blanca Torres covers retail and consumer issues. You can reach Torres at 925-943-8263 or at btorres@cctimes.com.