

# The <sup>NEW ROCHELLE</sup> Sound Report

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## Immigrant issue extends to New Rochelle



Residents marked the nationwide push for amnesty.

Photo taken in nearby Mamaroneck



A sign in a storefront in New Rochelle explains why the store is closed on May 1.

Photo/Kathy Gilwit

### Many take to the streets on May 1

By Kathy Gilwit

Joining in the nationally-observed boycott in sympathy for the millions of illegal immigrants seeking official status in the U.S., merchants throughout New Rochelle and the West End in particular closed down on Monday, May 1.

On Union Avenue shops were gated and locked, with the exception of #237, an Italian social club where contractors gathered in the early afternoon after a shorter than usual work day due to a skeleton staff. Over cappuccino, beer and cigarettes, four members articulated their opinions on the day-long boycott and the broader subject of illegal workers.

"If they want to work, let them pay taxes," said the first, a semi-retired painting contractor. "Give them the paperwork to pay taxes," added the second. "What I want to know is, why it took the government so long to act on this," said the third.

While a one-day boycott is a "wake up call," if continued for weeks and months, "that's reality," warned the third, Joe, whose five-man crew shrank down to one that day. "It's going to affect all of our lives...If I don't have them to work for me, how am I going to

give services to my 'rich' clients? One man can't do the work of five."

"I think in a one day boycott, they only hurt themselves," interjected a listener. "To me, it means they make matters worse."

For each of their businesses, "We try to hire legal workers," noted the first, and all three in unison said their preference was to pay by check; but if a good worker didn't have a number, they had no choice but to pay cash.

"You can't always get what you want," said the third. "If the government allows them in, why go after the contractors? If you open the door to let them in, then I'm going to use them."

They took issue with the notion of illegal immigrants being "cheap" labor. "Even the unskilled gets \$12-15 per hour- so where's the difference?" they asked.

All voiced at length their concerns about the additional drains on the health care and educational systems- with the fourth saying how his father carried an envelope with him on the boat into the U.S. certifying his good health; and the second and first relating firsthand stories about how their families were strapped with paying medical bills for hospital services rendered while those here illegally were given services for free.

And also, "It's not right they don't speak English- this is America.... It's no

longer a melting pot- What's this country going to look like in 20-30 years?"

As myth and truth mingled ("It's because the United States needs a pipeline for oil to go through Mexico- that's why everything is so nice-nice" "Every time an immigrant gets deported, he goes off the plane and comes in again the next week"), the conversation grew passionate when the comparison was made between the last wave of West End immigrants, largely Italian and largely legal, and the current trend- mostly Mexican, mostly illegal.

"We built the Brooklyn Bridge, the Empire State Building... successful monuments," said the third, adding that most Italian immigrants were "educated to their degree and produced here for a better America." "Nobody catered to us," he said.

"We need them, and they need us," said the first in conclusion. "Legal or illegal, it's not up to us; it's up to the government. We cannot do nothing. It's gone too far- the problem can't be corrected overnight."

The following day, with businesses open as usual, shopkeepers commented on the importance of the boycott. Noe Merlo, who owns a deli on Drake Avenue, said it wasn't a hard decision for him to close. "It's to try to help everybody to get a better situation," he said. An immigrant himself who gained

citizenship through amnesty in the late 80's, Merlo added, "We're here... we work hard for the U.S. People want to pay taxes."

Roberto Lopez, owner of Tostidas Quitupan, said it was the first time he'd closed since opening the store in 1992. "I think it was the right decision," he said, noting that as a leader of the Bellas Artes Business Council and in the Hispanic community, many followed his example. "I think we have to be forceful for something we wish to have."

Lopez supports legislation for some kind of permitting process to allow workers to prove themselves and move "up the ladder". "That way they can show they are part of working in the community and in the schools, to help us be a better city," he said.

Across the street, Fernando at Galicia Hair Salon went to Manhattan for the protest. "We need to go there and support the march," he said. Next door, Marco Babuna, owner of Trigal Bakery, said he closed out of respect for his clients- 50 stores in the Bronx, Mount Vernon, White Plains and New Rochelle- and attended the march in White Plains. "Everyone was closed," he said.

Students in the New Rochelle City School District also took part in the boycott. Public Information officer Maggie Skau said that compared to last Monday the absentee rate was 2.8 times higher.

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