

Group holds protest for arrested laborers

By KEITH WALKER

kwalker@potomacnews.com

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A group of about 60 day laborers, with placards written in Spanish and English, demonstrated on Saturday in Woodbridge to protest the recent arrests of 25 immigrants. Those arrested Tuesday were among a number of men who gather daily at Covenant Presbyterian Church on Longview Drive at U.S. 1 where they have permission to wait for contractors who come by and offer work, said Robert Gaskill, a member of Covenant Presbyterian. The men were charged with loitering at 7-Eleven, which adjacent to the church, said Detective Dennis Mangan, Prince William police spokesman. Ricardo Juarez, of the Workers Committee of Woodbridge, who led the demonstration at the church demanded " the immediate release of our brother workers." "None of those arrested were in possession of drugs or alcohol and none were gang members," Juarez said. "Their only crime was to seek employment," he said. Men at the demonstration who said they witnessed the arrests, claimed police detained people on church property, then led them to the convenience store property to make the arrests. Capt. Tim Rudy, Prince William police eastern district commander, said the loiterers typically leave the convenience store and go to the safety of the church property when they see the police coming. Police watch them do that as they pull up, Rudy said. "All of the arrests were made as a result of violations on the 7-Eleven property," Rudy said. Rudy said police get regular requests from 7-Eleven customers when the men leave the church property and hang out at the convenience store. "Every couple of weeks we have some kind of enforcement action down there," Rudy said. Thirteen of those charged had identification and were immediately released on summonses to appear in court, said Mangan. The other 12 did not have identification and were held in lieu of \$500 bond, Mangan said. "Out of those 12, we found three who had been deported previously and had come back into the country illegally," Mangan said. When they determined that two of the men had previous immigration violations, Prince William police notified the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services, Mangan said. David Martinez, one of the men arrested Tuesday without documentation, was released from jail after his brother and father posted his bail and he signed a promise to the immigration service to leave the country and showed officials that he had a return airline ticket to Honduras. Until he was arrested, Martinez arrived with the others every day at 6 a.m. to wait for the contractors who drive by and offer the construction, landscaping, cleaning, roofing or moving jobs that pay between \$7 to \$10 an hour. "I work honestly for the community and we thank the community for that opportunity," Martinez said through a translator. "For me it is not a violation to look for a job." Martinez also asked for the release of those who had been arrested. "We ask for the support of the community in order to release our brother workers who are detained at the police station," Martinez said. Martinez and others at the demonstration believed that the Prince William police had been recruited by the immigration service to round

them up for deportation. Gaskill, a member of Unity in the Community, a regional human rights advocacy group, said such concerns might be valid. "It's certainly one of the things that could evolve and happen," he said. Rudy said the Prince William police department is in no way an arm of the federal government. "This absolutely is not an immigration issue," Rudy said. "This is the matter of a criminal offense and the protection and the safety of the people in the community. I can assure you that I have not had one conversation with any immigration official in reference to this," he said. Rudy and Gaskill agreed that the situation is not something that is going away. There are men who need work and there are those who are willing to hire them. The trick is getting the two groups together in a way that causes as little friction as possible. "We know this is a very sensitive issue," Rudy said. Gaskill said that perhaps Prince William could follow the example of neighboring jurisdictions and designate a spot for the free exchange of labor and wages. "Obviously it's an issue that deserves official county attention," Gaskill said.