

Immigration dispute flares at center

Undocumented workers steal U.S. jobs, say picketers at a Denver day-labor facility. A counter-rally calls that racist.

By Karen E. Crummy Denver Post Staff Writer

Separated by a downtown street and polarized views, advocates and critics of illegal immigrants squared off at a Denver day-labor center Saturday.

"Go home racists, go home!" chanted roughly 200 people outside El Centro Humanitario para los Trabajadores on the east side of California Street.

"We will not be invaded by Mexico!" yelled back Terri McNabb, flanked by about 15 other illegal-immigrant opponents on the west side of the street.

Members of The Colorado Alliance for Immigration Reform and the Colorado Minutemen were picketing the center Saturday morning as part of a national "Stop the Invasion"

A protest by the Colorado Alliance for Immigration Reform and the Colorado Minutemen was challenged from across the street by supporters of El Centro Humanitario para los Trabajadores.

Organized by the Connecticut Citizens for Immigration Control, similar protests occurred in cities from New York to Texas to California.

Minsun Ji, executive director of the day-labor center, set up a counter rally to stand up for what she described as the "vulnerable workers."

"They've tried to shut us down, but we aren't going anywhere. We're here to protect the rights of everybody," she said.

The Colorado Minutemen put a video on its website showing the center and employers purportedly picking up day laborers. The center says it also provides services such as English classes and computer labs to low-wage workers.

Photographing and videotaping license-plate numbers of possible employers, as well as businesses and centers assisting day laborers has become a tactic used by a number of groups around the country opposed to illegal immigration. The Federal Immigration Reform and Enforcement coalition has a website, WeHireAliens.com, that is dedicated to listing businesses that hire undocumented workers. The site has found 582 employers in 39 states, including Colorado, that have allegedly hired illegal immigrants.

The illegal immigrants, said Eric Tavares, have taken jobs away from "real" Americans. "They're invading our country," said Tavares, one of the protesters outside the center. "They want jobs, free health care. I don't want my country turning into a Third World hellhole."

Mary Ann SanFilippo, a mother of six and grandmother of six, said she came from Berthoud to show her concern about illegal immigration. She isn't opposed to immigrants, she said, but thinks the number of people entering the country illegally needs to be curtailed because it's draining resources from communities.

"I'm for human rights; I'm not a racist," she said.

Sister Susan Swain, standing behind a rope-fence in front of the center, said she was perplexed by the views from the other side of the street.

"This country has welcomed immigrants forever," she said. "They are human beings. People seem to forget that."

Cesar Huanca, a native of Peru, said through a translator that he came to the United States to work so he could send money back to his family.

It is people like Huanca, said union organizer Paul Lopez, "that do the jobs nobody else wants to do."