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COURIER 05/13/2008

Dozens protest immigration raid

By JENS MANUEL KROGSTAD, Courier Staff Writer

WATERLOO - More than 150 people marched Monday night in a peaceful but raucous protest outside of National Cattle Congress.

For two hours, demonstrators marched, chanted and waved flags along the sidewalk that runs along NCC grounds, where detainees from the immigration raid in Postville were being held.

At times, they turned towards federal agents on the other side of the barbed wire fence to chant slogans like "ICE go home."

But they reserved their most passionate, throtiest protests for when buses, presumably carrying detainees, pulled into the grounds.

"When something like this happens, it hits home," said Gloria Wickham, a native of Mexico.

Tensions rose at several points during the demonstration, and emotions sometimes boiled over.

About half of the crowd were young protesters who arrived to express their anger over the raids. They generally yelled the loudest, and at times shook the NCC's fencing.

"We work hard, we stay out of trouble, and they want to take us away?" said Cesar Bravo, 18, a student at Waterloo West High School. "When they hit Tama (County) in a raid, they took my uncle. They ruin our families."

Veronica Retuer-Villagrana, 17, said she was upset because most illegal immigrants stay out of trouble.

"We come here to work, not be criminals," she said.

Protestors originally set up across the street from the detention facility, but were forced to move when a representative of Culligan Water Outlet complained they were on private property.

A man, who identified himself as the owner of the Culligan business but refused to give his name, exchanged heated words with Mario Basurto, program coordinator at El Centro Latinoamericano.

"What are you protesting with the American flag for?" the man said.

After demonstrators were told they had to move, they marched in a circle on Ansborough Avenue, blocking traffic for a few minutes. Around that time several police cars arrived to help control the crowd. Shortly thereafter, leaders of the protest met with police then told the group to move to the sidewalk or risk arrest.

As the sun set, four counter-protesters set up across the street flying an American flag. After exchanging

shouts across Ansborough Avenue, police asked them not to antagonize the crowd.

But when the protestors spotted their flag they yelled, "Hey, did you know your flag is backwards?"

The counter-protesters quickly flipped it around. Eric Fosselman said he even though he didn't agree with what the people were protesting, he didn't have a problem with them because they were probably legal residents.

"The people over there, they're not illegals - they can be here," he said.

By about 10 p.m., representatives of El Centro Latinoamericano were already planning how to deliver legal aid to detainees the next day. They talked with Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents through the fencing to figure out how to send lawyers into the facility Tuesday morning.