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400 march to NCC grounds

JENS MANUEL KROGSTAD, Courier Staff Writer

WATERLOO - As protestors approached the National Cattle Congress, some linked arms.

Others curled their fingers around the chain-link fence, faced a group of federal agents staring stoically through the barrier, and held up signs.

More than 400 people from across Iowa and neighboring states had just marched nearly three miles along River Road Sunday.

They started at Queen of Peace Catholic Church, where clergy, union workers and activists denounced last week's immigration raid in Postville.

On May 12, Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents detained 389 workers at Agriprocessors in the largest single raid in U.S. history. A majority have been charged criminally with identity theft and related crimes.

Humberto Naba leaned wearily against the fence and wiped his eye as he gazed into the Cattle Congress grounds, oblivious to the speakers leading a vigil at the NCC gates.

"I'm thinking of the people who were in here," he said in Spanish. "They treat them like terrorists. We're not terrorists. We're immigrants fighting to put food on the table."

The emotions of the past week flooded out of Naba. Even as he continued in Spanish, he looked into grounds again as he spoke and raised his voice to address a nearby agent taking pictures of the crowd.

As other protesters looked on silently, he asked whoever would listen if they had children. He pleaded with them to think of the children and the mothers he had seen crying inside of St. Bridget's Catholic Church in Postville, where many Hispanics have taken refuge after the raid.

He told them he and other immigrants don't want to take the country away from Americans, they simply want to improve their lives - even if they must work 20 hours a day.

"You also have kids. You want the best for your kids, too. I know it," he said.

A group of about 25 traveled from Minnesota for the march, and brought a truckload of supplies for those affected by the raid.

Adriana Sanchez said she took part in a protest last week in a heavily Latino neighborhood in Minneapolis, where she lives. She made the trip, she said, because she belongs to the same working class as those arrested last week.

"We need to learn from Iowa, so it doesn't happen again elsewhere," she said.

Enrique Hernandez and group of men walked a large banner that announced they played for a Marshalltown soccer league. Last week's raid hit home, he said, especially because a December 2006 raid on a Swift meatpacking plant - where Hernandez works - is still fresh in his mind.

"There's still a lot of hurt. Even though they're not our blood relation, it still hurts," he said.

Mary Cushing of Waterloo said she marched to support her Hispanic friends and neighbors. Even though they weren't directly affected by the raid, she said the community remains shaken.

Cushing, a teacher with Cedar Valley Catholic Schools, said she is upset no one in Waterloo demanded answers when, for more than a week, federal officials set up what would be a detention facility.

"I'm angry that that can happen in Waterloo, and that we didn't talk about it; that we didn't know what was happening," she said.