

Immigration attorney on what's next after 'Day Without Immigrants' protest

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A sign alerts customers that restaurant VegeNation is closed in support of the Day Without Immigrants protest, Thursday, Feb. 16, 2017, in Las Vegas. (AP/John Locher)

As New Yorkers woke up Thursday morning and commuted to their jobs, several popular restaurants and bodegas remained shuttered throughout the day in solidarity with (<http://www.theblaze.com/news/2017/02/16/businesses-across-the-country-close-in-solidarity-with-a-day-without-immigrants-protest/>) the city's immigrants.

In Washington, D.C., professionals found a variety of their favorite restaurants closed at lunchtime, a simple sign in the window proclaiming that the business is “supporting our employees today.”

It was a “Day Without Immigrants” Thursday, a nationwide strike that gained traction through word-of-mouth and social media with no large national organization to guide it. Hundreds of restaurants and businesses across the country – particularly in largely urban areas such as Chicago, Atlanta, Los Angeles, New York and Washington, D.C. — closed or only sold limited products.

Multiple schools and daycares, too, closed Thursday.

Becki Young, a D.C.-based immigration attorney who specializes with those in the restaurant industry, told TheBlaze that the premise behind the protest was to show that “our economy wouldn’t function without immigrants” and the restaurant industry especially would crumble without them.

“I don’t think that’s a debatable point,” Young said in an interview following the Day Without Immigrants.

Young said she works predominantly with immigrants who are in the country legally, including “highly skilled professionals” who are “sometimes among the highest echelons of society.” The companies that hire her, Young said, often do so to get her help in bringing workers to the country and keeping them in the U.S. legally.

But while there are many immigrants in the restaurant industry — both documented and not — Young said immigrants as a whole can have a negative connotation.

The individual people who she works with “get respect, but immigrants as a whole definitely do not get respect,” Young said. “It’s amazing to me that people really do forget how young our country is and that we are a nation of immigrants.”

Young added:

The work ethic of immigrants is something that you hear a lot about. I think certainly people who get up early, work hard all day, go to bed late and get up the next day deserve a lot of respect. I think that basic respect is certainly something that is lacking. And respect for basic human dignity, too.

But, as Young pointed out, Thursday’s protest was most likely more predominantly felt in urban areas with a higher immigrant population — although the strike did take some by surprise in smaller communities.

According to the Island Packet (<http://www.islandpacket.com/news/local/article133067094.html>), parents were surprised Thursday to find that a daycare in Bluffton, South Carolina, was closed for the day — reportedly with little notice.

“Why didn’t they tell me?” one parent asked after showing up to the closed daycare. “Why didn’t they call the parents? I’ve got to go to work.”

Little Steps, the bilingual daycare, said in an announcement about its closing Wednesday night, according to the Island Packet:

As an educational institution, I do not mix politics nor any beliefs within the daycare’s decisions, but all our staff members are immigrants. I cannot take away their right of protesting for what they believe is not fair.

Even though everyone working in Little Steps is legal in this country, we believe it’s imperative to join this movement and protest since there are family relatives and friends being affected by all the raids and it saddened us to see the way ... things are being taken care of.

“I definitely think [the protests are] only a first step, and we have a long way to go,” Young said. “In the middle of the country, where a protest like this is needed, there may not be as many immigrant workers.”

“I think the next step in terms of protests and civil disobedience is to do work in the interior of our country where people maybe have slightly different opinions about these issues because they don’t see it every day and don’t necessarily appreciate it,” she continued.

As Young pointed out, in the Washington, D.C., area, about 48 percent of those working in the restaurant industry are foreign-born.

Nationwide, immigrants are 1.4 times more likely than U.S.-born workers to work in the leisure and hospitality sector, according to the Pew Charitable Trusts (<http://www.pewtrusts.org/en/multimedia/data-visualizations/2015/immigrant-employment-by-state-and-industry>).