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Fear possible reason for dip in attendance

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The rhetoric was there, but the crowd was not. Tuesday's pro-immigration rally on the Morristown Green drew about 250 people, far fewer than last year.

Was it because of the town's threatened crackdown on illegal immigration? One could only speculate.

Alison Hunt, who has worked with the pro-immigration group, Wind of the Spirit, said she thought the proposed crackdown impacted turnout.

Of course, there is no crackdown yet.

What Mayor Donald Cresitello wants to do is to deputize about 10 town police officers to enforce federal immigration law. The mayor's request to the federal government has not been acted upon and it is anyone's guess when it will. But fear is an interesting thing. Some people may have thought there was danger of arrest if they showed up on the Green.

Or maybe they just thought it was going to rain.

The rally on the Green was duplicated across the country. And it came as Congress has shown a total inability to deal with this issue. The House and Senate last year approved strikingly different bills on the subject. Rather than seek to mesh them together, as is customary, Congress has done nothing. You can call this a bipartisan failure, because Republicans controlled Congress last year and Democrats do so this year.

"If we don't act, then both the Democratic and Republican parties can go back to their comfort zones and do nothing," Angelica Salas, director of the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles, told the Associated Press after a rally in that city. "They won't have the courage to resolve a major situation for millions of people."

It is the failure of Congress to act that prompts officials such as Cresitello to come up with their own solutions. As inaction continues, the problem grows and emotions on both sides become rawer.

Stuart Sydenstricker, one of the organizers of the Morristown rally, said he didn't think the issue was all that divisive.

But he added, "I think the tactics the administration is using are divisive."

The view here is that Sydenstricker is half right. Both the mayor's tactics and the issue are dividing people. There is a segment out there that sees illegal immigrants as "invaders" and "parasites." Part of that view is fueled by the rhetoric of the far right, which always is looking for a scapegoat.

Attend one of these rallies, however, and it's hard to see exactly what people are afraid of.

Christian Morales, 32, came from Guatemala eight years ago and lives in Morristown doing "maintenance" work. He said he's a resident alien, but he said of those here illegally, "They work very hard. They have the right to live without fear." Morales was walking around with a jug collecting money for Wind of the Spirit.

Many in the crowd carried signs saying no human being was illegal. There was a sign reading, "Keep Diversity in Morristown," and another conveying the same message in Spanish, "Conservemos La Diversidad de Morristown."

The rally, at times, included a heavy dose of Christianity. A number of local ministers told the crowd -- some in English, some in Spanish -- that there are no borders or nationalities in the "kingdom of God."

But it was also part left-wing politics. Hawkers sold copies of The Militant, a socialist newspaper, and other periodicals carrying a similar theme. One man sported a red T-shirt with the likeness of Che Guevara, a South American revolutionary. He also carried a sign reading, "We are America." He was apparently unfazed by the contradiction.

But if you excuse the assorted excesses, many in the crowd made substantive points, such as Sydenstricker. He noted that many of the mayor's supporters use the 2002 murder of 8-year-old Walter Valenzuela, allegedly by an illegal immigrant, as evidence of the crimes they commit.

But Sydenstricker said one reason Porfirio Jimenez, the accused killer, was caught was because the Latino community trusted and helped the police. He said such cooperation would vanish if Cresitello's deputization plan is enacted.

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