Many Domestic Workers Pass on Protests, Tend to Business

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For many households across Southern California that depend on domestic workers, Monday was the usual day with immigrants.

Gardeners in Beverly Hills, nannies in Hancock Park and other domestic workers around the region reported for duty Monday instead of attending the immigration marches. Their reasons: They needed the money and didn't want to alienate their employers.

Pushing a stroller on Olympic Avenue near Los Angeles High School, Maria Ortoñez said she never considered taking the day off. Ortoñez, a 33-year-old single mother, depends on the $350 she earns each week taking care of the bubbly 18-month-old in the carriage. Her own children, ages 11 and 8, attend public school while Ortoñez works.

"I don't have anyone else to help me out," said the recent immigrant from Honduras. With rent, clothes and food to pay for, "I just don't have the luxury of staying at home."

The money she receives is all under the table, as Ortoñez is an undocumented worker.

She's part of a powerful underground economy of domestic workers that care for the childrens, homes and lawns of many Americans. In California there are about 164,000 child-care workers and housekeepers in private households, with about 92,000 in Los Angeles, Riverside and Orange counties. Of these Southern California workers, nearly 80% of the nannies are Latino, said Philip Cohen, sociology professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, who based his estimates on 2000 census figures.

More than a dozen nannies and gardeners interviewed locally said they were conscious of how much their employers depended on their help. "If I don't show up to work, it makes life very difficult for the woman I work for," said Martha Ruiz, 46.

Watching her 22-month-old twin charges play in Roxbury Park in Beverly Hills, Ruiz said in Spanish that her employer would have had a tough time rearranging her schedule.

So gardeners in Beverly Hills were busy as usual Monday tending to the lush, manicured lawns amid the roaring sounds of leaf blowers and lawn mowers.

As he packed up his truck chock-full of gardening supplies, Mauricio Hernandez, 27, voiced his full support for immigration reform, but said taking a day off was not an option.

Hernandez said he's a legal resident after moving here from Mexico a decade ago. He came to the U.S. illegally and understands the challenges other immigrants face. But with a wife and a 1-year-old at home, the loss of a day's pay would be too great.

Gardeners earn about $100 for a full day's work.

"If I worked for myself, I would have been out there" with the protesters, Hernandez said. "But there are some houses I had to attend to today that bring in a lot of money and I can't risk losing those contracts."

It was precisely her dependency on child care that led Mar Vista resident Lisa Peri, 35, to give her nanny, Juanita, the day off with pay to attend the demonstrations. Peri said she wanted to keep a good rapport with her helper, who takes care of her 2-year-old and 3-month-old.

"We didn't want to put her in an awkward position," Peri said. Early news of the boycott allowed Peri and her husband to rearrange their work schedules to take care of the children.

For Nati Villagran, deciding to work Monday was a difficult choice. The 44-year-old Guatemalan immigrant, who became a legal U.S. resident three years ago, knew she also had to miss work today for a dental visit.

Her employer was supportive of her attending the demonstrations. But Villagran did the math and her $700 weekly paycheck would have been cut by 40% if she had skipped work both days.

So Villagran spent Monday watching her charges, twin 3-year-olds, play in Roxbury Park.

Relying on illegal labor

The percentage of the workforce made up of illegal immigrants is higher in private households nationwide than in any other sector.

Percentage of illegal immigrants working in selected industries:

- Private households 21%
- Food manufacturing 14
- Farming 13
- Furniture making 13
- Construction 12
- Textile manufg. 12
- Food services 12
- Administrative and support services 11
- Hotels 10
- Other manufacturing 6

Source: Pew Hispanic Center