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To Overhaul Immigration, Advocates Alter Tactics

By JULIA PRESTON
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Lacing up new pairs of walking shoes with a flourish, four immigrant students set out on foot from downtown Miami on Friday, starting a four-month walk to Washington to protest what they called the Obama administration's lack of action on legislation granting legal status to illegal immigrants.

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Oscar Hidalgo for The New York Times
Four students, including three who risk detention as illegal immigrants, began a walk to Washington from Miami on Friday.

Three of the four protesters, who are current or former students at Miami Dade College, do not have legal-resident status and risk detention by [immigration](#) authorities during the 1,500-mile walk.

The students' trek showed the resolve and also some limitations of groups supporting an immigration overhaul that would include measures to legalize illegal immigrants. Those groups said this week that they would start a national campaign in January to pressure [President Obama](#) to push for the overhaul before midterm elections in November.

But as immigration enforcement [has continued at a steady pace during the first year of the Obama administration](#), many illegal immigrants are clinging to jobs and families in this country and may be afraid to participate in public demonstrations. With unemployment holding at 10 percent, immigrant advocates acknowledge that their campaign could awaken passionate opposition in Congress and around the country.

The students in Miami said in a statement that they decided to begin their walk because they had a "deep desire and need for complete citizenship" after they reached dead-ends in school or work because of their lack of legal immigration status. The protesters include Carlos Roa, 22, who was 2 years old when his parents brought him here from Venezuela, and Felipe Matos, 23, sent from Brazil by his mother when he was 14. They say they support proposals in overhaul bills that would open a path to citizenship for students who came to this country illegally when they were young.

Mr. Matos, a former student government president at Miami Dade, said he had been accepted by [Duke University](#) but had not been able to attend because his lack of legal status prevented him from getting financial aid. Trained as a teacher, he has not been

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able to take a job without a valid [Social Security](#) number.

Starting with a small but noisy send-off at noon by about 100 people on the steps of a landmark building in Miami known as the Freedom Tower, the students said they would walk about 16 miles a day, stopping to sleep at churches and immigration centers. They hope to reach Washington in May.

They said they had concluded that the exposure to immigration agents on the walk was not much greater than what they faced in their daily lives.

“We are aware of the risk,” Mr. Matos said by telephone. “We are risking our future because our present is unbearable.”

The case of a third student marcher, Gaby Pacheco, 24, an Ecuadorean, and her family is on appeal in immigration court. The fourth student, Juan Rodriguez, a Colombian who is 20, said he was not at risk because he became a legal resident in 2008, after 13 years in this country.

[Immigration and Customs Enforcement](#) officials did not respond to requests by telephone and e-mail for comment on Friday.

Elsewhere, immigrant groups have been trying other tactics to push for reform, after an overhaul bill they supported [was defeated in the Senate in 2007](#) by a huge surge of voter opposition. In November the groups organized a mass conference call on which, they said, more than 60,000 participants on mobile phones spoke with Representative Luis V. Gutierrez, Democrat of Illinois, to discuss an overhaul proposal. Mr. Gutierrez [introduced the bill](#) in the House last month.

In California, where hundreds of thousands of immigrants joined demonstrations in 2006, advocacy groups have shifted their focus, said Angelica Salas, executive director of the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles. Now the groups are working to send immigrants who are voters to pay frequent visits to federal lawmakers who have not supported an overhaul.

The [Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights](#), a group in Chicago, is preparing rallies for mid-January with labor unions and African-American churches, hoping to persuade American workers that immigrants would be less likely to undercut wages if they had legal status and could participate openly in unions.

Republican lawmakers said they remained confident that they could defeat any overhaul proposal. They said it would be political folly for the Obama administration to propose a huge legalization program for illegal immigrants when so many Americans are out of work.

“Allowing millions of illegal immigrants to stay and take jobs away from citizens and legal immigrants is like giving a burglar a key to the house,” said Representative [Lamar Smith](#) of Texas, the senior Republican on the House Judiciary Committee.



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