In mid-October, it was announced by the city of Portland, Maine that the city would be opening an office to house United States Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE). The new office will be located on the fourth floor of One City Center, and officials say that the office will be actively focusing on crimes related to human trafficking, child exploitation, transnational drug trafficking and transnational terrorism rather than illegal immigration and deportation efforts.

However, even though the new office has declared that they are not focusing on deportation efforts, many people have expressed their dislike of the new office in Portland. People from the community and from various areas around the state showed up on Oct. 14 to protest the arrival of the ICE office.

University of Maine fourth-year student Desiree Vargas was one of the protesters who showed up to voice her disapproval of the office. Vargas, who is a vocal activist who co-founded the Racial Equity and Justice initiative, was in Portland with fellow activist to celebrate Indigenous Peoples’ Day. After Vargas attended the Indigenous Peoples’ Day celebrations, she walked downtown to participate in the ICE protests.

The protesters marched through Portland, starting at Monument Square to a plaza in front of One City Center. Many carried signs that said things such as “Abolish ICE” and “No Deportations. Open Borders,” and chanted “Abolish ICE” as they were marching. Along with the march, a petition was passed around through the crowd to urge the landlord of the building at One City Center to terminate the lease held with the agency.

“It is always great to see community solidarity,” Vargas said. “It is comforting to be in a space where you know everything there welcomes all people to be their neighbor.”

Vargas, whose work with the Racial Equity and Justice initiative uplifts people of color by giving them resources for education and support, has participated in various other events to help raise awareness of the inequality that people of color face daily.

In the past, she helped to organize “End Family Separation,” a rally to call attention to the mistreatment that immigrants and asylum seekers have faced at the southern border. She also worked with the Peace and Justice Center of Eastern Maine, which organized a local relief campaign for the people detained at the border. The campaign organized and collected supplies such as non-perishable foods, socks, underwear and diapers to send to migrant caravans.

Vargas noted that, although it is important to vocalize the impact that ICE has had on families, she feels as though there are other actions that people can take to achieve social justice.
“I believe rallies bring social awareness but are not social justice. Social reform includes advocates on behalf of immigrants working with attorneys and politicians to create a different system that will help the customs department have a more ethical and efficient process,” Vargas said. “Social justice would include reparations for families hurt by family separation and death in customs, in addition to infrastructure change internationally and nationally for a more equal socio-economic system, rather than a stratified one.”

Vargas urges members of the community to do whatever they can to fight for racial equity.

“Rallying is not enough. It is hard for me to attend rallies now, as they are a painful reminder that this is not enough,” Vargas said. “Rallies with calls to action are great, but at this point, we barely have time anymore to raise awareness, we only have time to act as people are dying, being hurt, and being separated from their families and friends.”

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