My View: Trump's big mistake at the Department of Labor

By Michael Oswalt

Sometime in the next few weeks, the Senate will take up Donald Trump's nominee for secretary of labor, Andrew Puzder. While Trump has gotten a lot of attention for tough talk about protecting American workers through renegotiated trade deals and punishing companies that outsource jobs, picking Puzder proves Trump's takes are nothing more than smoke and tweets.

The U.S. Department of Labor's purpose is "to foster, promote, and develop the welfare of wage earners of the United States, to improve their working conditions, and to advance their opportunities for profitable employment." Yet as CEO of the company that controls fast food restaurants Carl's Jr. and Hardee's, Puzder has shown disdain for working people, and his record suggests that confirming him would be like putting the fox in charge of the henhouse.

On wages, Puzder bucks every trend. He opposes a Labor Department rule that would expand overtime pay and help around 12.5 million workers. While states and cities - responding in part to strikes from workers in Puzder's own industry - have been lining up to push the minimum wage to a livable $15 an hour, Puzder says no to that kind of meaningful increase. Instead, his restaurants have been repeatedly investigated for wage theft. Since 2009, 60 percent of those inquiries have resulted in violations.

Puzder's views on working conditions are no better. He doesn't like paid sick leave laws. He is against meal and rest breaks for people working multi-hour shifts. Though a recent survey found that four out of five fast food workers have been burned on the job (and some told to use mustard as first aid), Puzder is a well-known regulatory critic who as secretary would be charged with enforcing the safety standards that prevent these and other injuries each year.
Concern that he might underenforce those laws is not theoretical. On his watch, Hardee's and Carl's Jr have been caught breaking safety regulations 98 times, including 36 "serious" violations that risked death or major physical harm.

But perhaps most surprising for someone in line to become the nation's top workplace advocate is Puzder's desire to replace his own employees with robots. It's not because of an early fascination with the Jetsons. According to Puzder, machines are "always polite ... they never take vacation," and they won't sue him for discrimination.

Simply put, it's the secretary of labor's job to safeguard employee protections and enhance rights, not oppose them, avoid them or fantasize them away. If President Trump really cares about working people, nominating Andrew Puzder is the wrong way to show it.

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