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The Department of Labor and the common good

Bishop Gabino Zavala | Oct. 7, 2009

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Commentary

In his most recent encyclical, Pope Benedict XVI reminds us that a nation?s political and civic institutions are ? or should be -- instruments for serving the common good. This claim resonates with the civic values of the American political tradition. The paramount role of those institutions is to promote and secure justice -- particularly for those who are the most vulnerable to abuse, as so many working people in our society are today.

The U.S. Department of Labor is such an instrument, but despite the leadership of the highly capable and talented Secretary of Labor, Hilda Solis, the agency?s ability to serve the working families of our country has been significantly hindered during the last several months.

The vision of the new Secretary of Labor has been to revitalize the Labor Department since she assumed the position in February. Prior to her appointment, the core mission and responsibilities of the Labor Department were all but neglected during the previous administration. Working families now have a real advocate at the helm of the Labor Department. But Solis has been made to do without two key staff whose appointments have been delayed for several months, now pending final Senate confirmation.

Last spring, President Obama announced the nominations of M. Patricia Smith for the position of Solicitor of Labor and Lorelei Boylan for Wage and Hour Administrator, two outstanding women with proven records of effective public service in the New York State Department of Labor. Their appointments were delayed, however, when Senators Johnny Isakson, R-GA, and Michael Enzi, R-WY, raised dubious objections related to Smith?s efforts to prevent wage theft in New York by forming partnerships with businesses and community initiatives in the state. Even a cursory review of Patricia Smith?s record of achievements as Commissioner of the New York State Department of Labor demonstrates her effectiveness as a leader. During her first year as Commissioner in 2007, the state labor department increased its recovery of wage underpayments by 37 percent and its collection of fines from employers who violated wage and hour laws by 20 percent.

Lorelei Boylan served as the Director of Strategic Enforcement in the Labor Standards Division of the New York State Department of Labor. She was responsible for managing the agency?s partnerships with business

and non-profit advocacy organizations, a collaboration that successfully increased the protections of working people in the state and one that promoted an even playing field for law-abiding employers who are too often at a competitive disadvantage for refusing to exploit their employees by withholding their due wages ? a practice that is scandalously common among many unscrupulous employers across the country. Wage theft is a national crisis and we desperately need competent and committed people like Patricia Smith and Lorelei Boylan in the U.S. Labor Department if we hope to finally put an end to this disgrace.

The Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pension Committee will have an opportunity to at last confirm their appointments today (Oct. 7), and it is imperative that it does so. The confirmation of Smith and Boylan will be a great benefit for all working people and will finally allow the Labor Department to effectively carry out one of its most important functions: the prevention of wage theft.

The Department of Labor cannot truly serve the common good if two of its most important offices remain vacant -- if good people like Patricia Smith and Lorelei Boylan are prevented from serving in those offices.

[Bishop Gabino Zavala serves the Archdiocese of Los Angeles as the Auxiliary Bishop for the San Gabriel Region and is President of the Board of Directors of Interfaith Worker Justice.]

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