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OSHA Chief Pledges to Be Aggressive on Enforcement Former AFSCME Official

By ARI PAUL



The Chief-Leader/Michel Friang

A SYMPATHETIC EAR: U.S. Acting Assistant Secretary of Labor for the Occupational Safety and Health Administration Jordan Barab, a former AFSCME safety and health director, told union reps and industrial hygienists that the agency would hire more inspectors as well as listen to new ideas about work safety enforcement.

Now one of their own is in charge.

During a briefing at the District Council of Carpenters' downtown headquarters June 11, union reps and industrial hygienists tossed ideas at the nation's new Acting Assistant Secretary of Labor for the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, a former union activist and writer who promised sweeping improvements.

Cites Increased Budget

Jordan Barab—a former safety and health director at the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees and a labor adviser to the U.S. House of Representatives Education and Labor Committee—told the group his agency will be emboldened by a 10-percent proposed increase in funding in the 2010 Federal budget, adding that

it has already received \$13.6 million from the Obama Administration's stimulus package. With this money, Mr. Barab said, the agency will be able to hire 130 new Inspectors.

"Needless to say, it's not enough," he said, vowing that OSHA was also dedicated to making its Inspector force younger and more diverse.

Lack of Inspectors has been a recent problem in the state, according to the New York Committee on Occupational Safety and Health, one of the sponsors of last week's briefing.

One of the group's industrial hygienists, Dave Newman, questioned whether OSHA will examine how it oversees worker safety and health at disaster response sites. He noted, in particular, that thousands of workers responding to 9/11 as well as to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita have experienced respiratory ailments, bone and muscle injuries, and mental illnesses such as post-traumatic stress disorder. Mr. Newman said that in these cases, OSHA guidelines were scrapped in the initial response to these disasters. He suggested that OSHA should discontinue this policy.

"Obviously, there is a rescue phase and obviously we're not going to be sitting around writing citations, and obviously there is a much-longer recovery phase where clearly there has to be some enforcement," Mr. Barab responded. "How you draw that line, where you draw that line, how do you create the criteria depending on the disaster, where you draw that line, that's what we need to figure out and we will figure that out."

In addition to calling for more funding of the agency, NYCOSH urged attendees to push their Congress Members to support the Protecting America's Workers Act, which has been introduced in the House.

"This bill would stiffen penalties for serious violations of the [Occupational Safety and Health Act], extend OSHA coverage to public employees, strengthen protections for whistleblowers, prohibit programs that discourage employees from reporting job injuries, and give new rights to information about OSHA investigations to family members of victims of workplace injuries and fatalities," stated a letter circulated by NYCOSH aimed at Congress Members.

It also said that while the number of workplace fatalities is dropping, there has been an



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An Open Door for Unions

Above all, Mr. Barab said, OSHA would be open to hearing from union leaders and industrial hygienists on suggestions on enforcing worker safety more vigorously as well as bringing younger people into the world of occupational safety and health, a craft he described as having an aging workforce.

A hygienist from the International Alliance of Theatrical and Stage Employees told Mr. Barab that the main problem was that many employers can flout the law with impunity. She noted she found in talking to workers in college auditoriums around the country, few of those workplaces will ever be seen by an OSHA Inspector because there aren't enough of them.

"All we need are ideas and money and we're on our way," Mr. Barab said. "We have plenty of ideas here."

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