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LABOR SECRETARY NOMINEE ACOSTA OUTLINES POLICY

A job-training program he touts as a model would see cuts under President Trump's budget

By Eric Morath
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Labor secretary nominee Alexander Acosta testified in support of job-training programs targeted for cuts by the White House.

In four pages of written testimony, released at the start of his confirmation hearing on Wednesday, Mr. Acosta provided senators the first clear look at his views on labor policy. He would be "a voice for workers," he wrote, and would enforce workplace safety laws "fully and fairly."

Job-training programs can "have substantial positive impact on American workers," but a better effort must be made to align training with the skills employers demand, he wrote.

One program he named as a model, Job Corps, provides 16- to 24-year-olds with free vocational training. President Donald Trump's budget, released last week, would see centers closed and funding for other job-training programs reduced, thereby shifting responsibility for such services to state and local governments, and employers.

Mr. Acosta said the Labor Department must join with local governments, industry and educational institutions.

"I will work with you to maximize the impact of every taxpayer dollar Congress directs towards job-training programs," he told senators.

Mr. Acosta, who has served as law-school dean at Florida International University College of Law since 2009, also outlined his approach to regulatory enforcement, without offering specifics.

"As a former prosecutor, I will always be on the side of the law and not any particular constituency," he said.

Some businesses criticized the Obama administration for targeting specific industries, such as fast-food restaurants, for increased scrutiny.

Mr. Acosta's statement that he would continue the Labor Department's traditional role of being "a voice for workers" could provide some reassurance to unions, some of which have supported Mr. Acosta's nomination. Some unions feared Mr. Trump's first choice for labor secretary, fast-food executive Andy Puzder, would predominantly side with businesses and managers.

"Whether it is those who are working," Mr. Acosta wrote, "those who still seek work, those who are discouraged or underemployed, or those who have retired, if confirmed as the secretary of labor, I will advocate for them."

Before Wednesday, Mr. Acosta had not spoken publicly on specific policy views since his nomination last month. That raised concerns among both lawmakers and businesses about how he would approach the job.

"You have not conveyed your views on federal labor law in public statements or publications to any significant extent," Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D., Mass.) wrote in a letter to Mr. Acosta this week. "I am eager to hear more about your stances on these important issues."

Before serving as a law school dean, Mr. Acosta served two appointments in President George W. Bush's Justice Department. His last direct role in labor policy was a less-than-one-year stint on the National Labor Relations Board 15 years ago.

Mr. Acosta also practiced labor law early in his career.

His confirmation process is expected to move more smoothly than that of Mr. Puzder.

Unions and worker groups strongly protested that nomination, pointing to Mr. Puzder's comments critical of raising the minimum wage and increasing overtime eligibility. But ultimately he stepped aside as personal controversies emerged and Republicans hedged on their support.

Republicans, so far, appear to be uniform in supporting Mr. Acosta, who has been confirmed three times previously by the Senate.

And Democratic Sen. Bill Nelson signaled he will vote for the fellow Floridian. Republicans control the Senate, and a simple majority is required to win approval for one of the few vacant cabinet posts.