Unions Promise to Probe Acosta, New Trump Labor Secty Nominee

By Mark Gruenberg
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WASHINGTON (PAI) — Leaders of the AFL-CIO and the Service Employees promised to rigorously probe the record of Alexander Acosta, dean of a Florida law school and chairman of a South Florida bank, who is GOP President Donald Trump’s new nominee for Secretary of Labor.

Acosta is also a former Republican named National Labor Relations Board member. Trump announced his nod for Acosta, 46, who is also a former U.S. attorney for Miami and law clerk for conservative U.S. Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito, before Alito joined that court, on Feb. 16.

Trump named Acosta barely 24 hours after the president’s first choice, fast food executive Andrew Puzder, withdrew in the face of certain Senate defeat. Workers, unions and their allies exposed his bad record on workers’ rights, the minimum wage, overtime pay, safety and health violations and wage theft at his restaurants and sexism in the firms’ ads.

Unions celebrated Puzder’s withdrawal with an early-morning rally near the Capitol. Later, they had cautious reactions to Acosta. But ThinkProgress, a progressive blog, raised questions about Acosta’s record in George W. Bush’s Justice Department’s civil rights division.

For his part, Trump, meeting earlier with the self-named Trump Caucus of lawmakers, called Acosta, “a star, a great person, a great person.”

"Working people changed the game on this nomination. Unlike Andy Puzder, Alexander Acosta’s nomination deserves serious consideration. In one day, we’ve gone from a fast-food CEO who routinely violates labor law to a public servant with experience enforcing it," AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka said.

"We will of course review Mr. Acosta’s record as thoroughly as we did the previous nominee’s. Mr. Acosta will have to answer tough questions and explain how he will enforce and uphold labor laws to benefit working people and not further tilt the balance of power toward corporate CEOs.

"The Labor Secretary is not just another Cabinet member. His or her actions directly impact our wages, safety, and rights on the job every single day. We will judge this nominee by the commitment he shows to making life better for working people,” Trumka added.

"Working people are still in this fight for an economy and political system that works for all of our families and where hard work means our families can get ahead,” added Service Employees President Mary Kay Henry. "This is the lens through which we will examine” Acosta’s record.

"Workers will stay in the streets to demand a Labor Secretary who is a champion for working people and fights to represent their interests in our economy,” Henry promised. The Puzder nomination drew mass protests, including from his own fast food chains’ workers.

ThinkProgress said the real problem with Acosta, who if confirmed would be the sole Hispanic-American in Trump’s Cabinet, is not with Acosta’s 125 written opinions in a 14-month stint as an NLRB member, but with his Civil Rights Division record.

ThinkProgress reported Acosta led the division from 2003-2005, at a time when another senior division official, Bradley Schlozman, used his hiring authority to slant the division staff by picking attorneys from lists submitted or analyzed, by right-wing groups.
Acosta denied he knew what Schlozman was doing, as Schlozman “hired conservative lawyers hostile to the CRD’s mission, purging the agency of people who believed in the work it exists to do,” ThinkProgress said. “Schlozman’s ploy did long-lasting damage to federal work on voting rights violations, police abuse, and other assaults on Americans’ rights.”

But other DOJ staffers from that era complained directly to Acosta about Schlozman’s activities, according to the Justice Department’s Inspector General. And Acosta told the IG “he became more concerned about Schlozman’s judgment...as a result of discussions Acosta had with retiring Voting Section Chief Joseph Rich about Schlozman’s management. Yet, Acosta took no action to alert those in his chain of command,” the report found.

Acosta left the division but didn’t report his suspicions until 2007, after several Republican senators raised the roof over the slanted hiring in the division and among U.S. attorneys. ThinkProgress also reported Acosta was involved tangentially in GOP efforts to suppress the minority vote in the 2004 presidential election in Ohio.