Reflections on Global Labor Issues

Saturday, April 7, 2012

This week I will be leaving my position as Deputy Undersecretary of the International Labor Affairs Bureau at the Department of Labor to become the International Labor Organization’s Executive Director for Social Dialogue. I’m looking forward to the opportunity to help spearhead global efforts to improve livelihoods and strengthen rights around the world.

I expect to work closely with governments, employers and workers in this effort. I am excited at the chance to work with labor ministries to help them strengthen their labor laws, regulations and enforcement. And, I will continue my long-term collaboration with employers and trade unions to find private sector solutions to the challenges and needs of the workplace and working households.

Leaving ILAB is very hard for me. I have spent three intense and thrilling years as head of the Bureau. When I joined the Obama Administration in early 2009, we faced the most intense economic crisis of our lifetimes. Over 200 million workers around the globe had lost their jobs. Our government and many others responded swiftly and helped to prevent a depression. We coordinated our work through the G20 (the governments of the world’s 20 largest economies) and this simultaneous stimulus helped all of our countries. ILAB organized the first meeting of G20 Labor and Employment Ministers, chaired by Secretary Solis, to share strategies for responding to the crisis and building a job-rich recovery.

Over the last three years, we have used a range of policy tools to improve rights and livelihoods in many countries. We have exchanged expertise with many governments, funded well-targeted technical assistance projects, strengthened the labor provisions in our free trade agreements and coordinated closely with representatives of workers and employers in the global supply chain. We drafted and have helped to implement a ground-breaking Labor Action Plan with Colombia that is addressing long-standing labor problems in that country. We are working in Haiti, under the HOPE II legislation, to help exporters understand and comply with core labor standards.

We have made progress in combating the worst forms of child labor using all the tools at our disposal. For example, we upgraded our annual global report on the worst forms of child labor, providing more information, more analysis and practical recommendations for governments. We have refocused our funding for child labor projects to make a lasting difference in the lives of children by helping their families build sustainable livelihoods so they no longer need to rely on their children’s labor.

I am also proud of the steps ILAB has taken to help protect vulnerable workers here in the U.S. We negotiated agreements between the U.S. and a number of Central American and Caribbean countries to work with their consulates to ensure that our country’s legal protections for workers’ health and safety and correct payment of wages are guaranteed in our workplaces. This helps protect the rights of all workers in the U.S.
These are just some of the successes we have achieved in the last three years. I have full confidence that the capable, resourceful and dedicated staff at ILAB will continue to forge ahead, with passion and purpose, after I leave.

Sandra Polaski is Deputy Undersecretary of the International Labor Affairs Bureau.

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