

US Labor Department targets worker protections, including safety regulations and rules protecting home health aides and farmworkers

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The US Department of Labor has unveiled proposals eliminating over 60 different rules protecting the rights of workers as part of the deregulatory drive by the Trump administration aimed at removing all restrictions on corporate profit-making.

In a statement announcing the changes, Secretary of Labor Lori Chavez-DeRemer, the darling of Teamsters President Sean O'Brien and other union bureaucrats, declared, “The Department of Labor is proud to lead the way by eliminating unnecessary regulations that stifle growth and limit opportunity.”

DeRemer said the Labor Department is seeking to deliver on Trump’s promise to restore “American prosperity through deregulation and marking the most ambitious proposal to slash red tape of any department across the federal government.”

Among the most significant proposed changes, the Labor Department wants to severely weaken the Occupational Safety and Health Administration’s (OSHA) General Duty Clause, which requires employers to maintain a workplace “free from recognized hazards that are causing or are likely to cause death or serious physical harm to his employees” and comply with OSHA rules more broadly. The General Duty Clause is a foundational principle laid down with the creation of OSHA in 1970.

Specifically, the Department of Labor wants to “to exclude from OSHA enforcement known hazards that are inherent and inseparable from the core nature of a professional activity or performance.” Instead, the government would rely solely on “reasonable efforts” to control inherent hazards.

The argument that OSHA must exclude hazards that

“cannot be eliminated without altering the activity” would essentially give employers the right to kill and maim with impunity.

In other rule changes, the Trump administration plans to axe minimum wage and overtime protections under the Fair Labor Standards Act for home health aides, who care for elderly and disabled people. Currently, non-exempt employees must receive time-and-a-half for hours worked over 40 hours in one week. The federal minimum wage currently stands at an absurd \$7.25 per hour, though some states mandate a higher minimum wage.

Slated to head OSHA under the Trump administration is David Keeling, a longtime executive at both UPS and Amazon, companies notorious for workplace injuries. This has not stopped the Teamsters bureaucracy from backing Keeling.

The proposed revisions also strip temporary workers in the H-2A farmworker program, which permits the hiring of temporary agricultural workers on an emergency basis, of collective bargaining protections. In addition, the changes rescind the requirement that employers go through a five-step process to terminate farmworkers and require that employers ensure farmworkers wear seat belts while being transported in vehicles.

Other significant changes weaken requirements related to the use of N-95 respirators and reporting musculoskeletal disorders.

As previously reported by the *World Socialist Web Site*, the Trump administration is seeking to water down or kill a proposed rule providing workplace protections against exposure to excessive heat.

In a statement quoted by the *Washington Post*, Debbie Berkowitz, a former OSHA senior policy adviser under

President Barack Obama, said, “In reality, OSHA doesn’t have that many regulations, period, that you could change without having dire consequences on health and safety.”

She added that, ultimately, cuts to OSHA staff, budget and research work are “going to have the biggest impact on worker safety.”

Other changes relate to the removal of anti-discrimination clauses related to the issuance of federal contracts and the weakening of Benefits Security Administration rules relating to employer benefit programs.

The proposed rule changes will directly impact some of the most exploited and vulnerable sections of workers, who are at the same time critical to the functioning of society. Farmworkers are subject to some of the harshest working conditions and have few protections against employer abuse. The rule providing collective bargaining rights promulgated under the Biden administration had already been largely eviscerated by the courts, yet was still considered an intolerable burden by rapacious agribusiness interests.

Responding to the proposed rule change, National Council of Agricultural Employers CEO Michael Marsh said, “We’re thrilled the rule was suspended and hopefully the administration will move further and withdraw the rule.”

Farmworkers, a large portion of whom are immigrants, including many undocumented immigrants, are facing a reign of terror by the Trump administration. *Reuters* quoted Lisa Tate, a farmer in Ventura County north of Los Angeles, who stated, “In the fields, I would say 70 percent of the workers are gone,” due to fear of being swept up during raids by Immigration Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Border Patrol Gestapo, leaving many crops unharvested.

California produces one-third of the US crop of vegetables and three-quarters of the country’s fruits and nuts. The state’s agriculture generated \$59.4 billion in cash receipts in 2023.

One immigrant farmworker and long-time US resident, also quoted by *Reuters*, said most of his coworkers had stopped showing up for work. “If they show up to work, they don’t know if they will ever see their family again,” he said.

An undocumented farmworker said, “Basically, we wake up in the morning scared. “We worry about the sun, the heat, and now a much bigger problem—many not returning home.”

The Trump administration rescinded a proposal to limit

immigration enforcement at certain industries, such as agriculture, heavily dependent on immigrant workers. A statement by the Department of Homeland Security declared, “The President has been incredibly clear. There will be no safe spaces for industries who harbor violent criminals or purposely try to undermine ICE’s efforts.”

Last year, Democratic California Governor Gavin Newsom vetoed a bill passed by the state legislature, but opposed by agribusiness, that would have made it easier for farmworkers to file workers compensation claims for heat related illness.

Home health assistants are also an extremely exploited and heavily immigrant section of the working class being impacted by Trump’s deregulatory rampage. More than 41 percent of home health aides in the US last year were foreign-born, according to the Labor Department. Twenty-two percent of nursing assistants were foreign born and 28 percent of personal care aides.

According to the American Immigration Lawyers Association (AILA), over 60 percent of home health aides in New York state are immigrants. AILA notes, “Many home healthcare workers rarely earn above minimum wage and are vulnerable to wage theft and retaliation in a state with one of the highest costs of living in the nation.”

The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that in 2023 there were 3,689,350 home health and personal care aides in the United States, earning a median hourly wage of \$16.05, with 25 percent earning \$14 per hour or less.

Congress never provided OSHA and other agencies charged with the protection of worker rights with robust enforcement powers or adequate funding. Now the few protections that exist are being destroyed, leaving workers on their own. Under these conditions workers must take matters into their own hands by forming rank-and-file safety committees at factories and workplaces capable of enforcing safe conditions.

That is the significance of the initiative by the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees to conduct an independent investigation into the death of Stellantis Dundee Engine worker Ronald Adams Sr. This is the spearhead of a campaign to link the struggles of workers across industries in a fight against the Trump administration’s war against workers.



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