

Safety & Health

NELP Expands Its Reach Into Safety And Health of Low-Wage Workers

The National Employment Law Project, generally known for its advocacy of higher pay for low-wage workers, is expanding its reach to include worker safety issues.

“We’ve occasionally touched on safety and health issues in the past, but this is the first time we’ve hired someone to create a program around the safety and health issues,” NELP Executive Director Christine Owens told Bloomberg BNA Jan. 15.

She said the addition of Debbie Berkowitz as NELP’s new senior fellow for worker safety and health is “a wonderful opportunity” for NELP to address safety and health issues “in a more cohesive way.”

Owens said worker safety and health “is an area where historically the unions really led the effort.” With the decline in union membership during the past few decades, however, it’s important for NELP to get involved, she said (15 DLR D-1, 1/23/15).

NELP describes itself as a non-profit, non-partisan research, education and advocacy organization that focuses on low-wage workers and the unemployed.

Berkowitz has worked at the Labor Department’s Occupational Safety and Health Administration, where she was a policy adviser and chief of staff. She also served as health and safety director of the United Food and Commercial Workers union and as health and safety specialist and program director at the AFL-CIO’s Food and Allied Service Trades Department.

Planning to Support Silica Rule. Owens said she isn’t sure whether NELP’s new health and safety focus will involve launching a “sector-specific” campaign that focuses on a particular industry, such as manicurists and “the environmental toxins they’re exposed to” in nail salons.

However, she predicted NELP definitely “will get quite involved with respect to the rule around silica.” Exposure to silica dust can cause silicosis, which can be fatal. Construction workers and miners often are at risk from exposure to silica.

OSHA’S proposed silica rule (RIN 1218-AB70), which would set stricter silica exposure limits, has been quite controversial, evoking wide support from unions and worker advocacy groups and opposition from many

business organizations and Republican legislators; (62 DLR A-9, 4/1/15). OSHA sent its draft final rule to the White House’s Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs Dec. 21 (244 DLR A-10, 12/21/15).

Frequently, the issues of low wages and health and safety hazards “are natural complements,” according to Owens. For example, in advocating for fair wages for home care workers, NELP noticed “there are a lot of safety and health issues that home care workers” face, she said (247 DLR A-12, 12/28/15).

“A lot of low-wage workers are in very high-risk jobs,” Berkowitz told Bloomberg BNA Jan. 15. She said the issue of retaliation against workers who report being injured or seeing workplace hazards is “something we really need to focus on.” OSHA and state safety and health agencies generally lack the staff to inspect most workplaces, so it’s important to protect workers who speak up, she said.

Latino Workers Have High Fatality Rates. She also mentioned that “the health and safety of Latino workers”—especially in the poultry, construction and car wash industries—“really deserves attention.” In testimony before the California state legislature in November, she said, Latino workers had a fatality rate 18 percent higher than the overall worker fatality rate in 2013.

Berkowitz said since she joined NELP in October, “we’ve been integrating” safety advocacy into NELP’s other issue campaigns on behalf of low-wage workers. In addition, she has written articles and assisted worker centers and grassroots groups throughout the U.S. on worker safety and health issues.

Berkowitz’s contributions will enable NELP to help “empower state and local organizations and workers and [help] to enhance policy reform,” Owens said. In particular, Owens said, she hopes Berkowitz’s collaboration with worker centers will show them “they can reach out to her” when they need assistance.

Whatever tack NELP takes now that Berkowitz is on board, “We’re excited about how it will enhance economic security for workers,” Owens said. She hopes to make NELP’s worker safety and health initiative “a really effective and meaningful program so eventually we can do on the safety front what we do on the wage front.”

By GAYLE CINQUEGRANI

To contact the reporter on this story: Gayle Cinquegrani in Washington at gcinquegrani@bna.com

To contact the editor responsible for this story: Karen Ertel at kertel@bna.com

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