

A good day's work



Trump's pick for Secretary of Labor has implications beyond US borders, writes Sally Tyler.

Like many others in Washington who had worked toward a Democratic victory in November, I decided to spend inaugural day far away, and found myself in Thailand, a nation experiencing its own transition. As the official 100-day mourning period following the King's death drew to a close, Thai people seemed anxious to get back to their usual activities.

The most visible sign of the end to public mourning was the fire sale on black clothing all over Bangkok. The sidewalks of Sala Daeng and the pop-up stalls behind Siam Square were crammed with racks of overstock black clothing, being sold at bargain basement prices, even by Thai standards. In between cruising for a little black dress at 200 baht, I sat down for lunch with a Thai labour activist associate, and our conversation turned to the government's new minimum wage policy, a patchwork of regional wage floors which [has proven controversial](#).

I asked him if anyone who was set to receive an increase was actually satisfied with the new policy. "Maybe if they live in Bangkok," he replied. My colleague hails from the still restive South, in one of eight provinces which will receive no increase to the daily minimum wage under the new policy.

Seven provinces, including Bangkok and Phuket, will benefit most, with workers there receiving the highest daily increase of 10 baht.

Provincial wage committees were charged with analysing the cost of living in each province, in order to recommend appropriate increases. My colleague criticised their methodology as failing to take into account certain crucial factors. In shortchanging Southern provinces, he said analysts ignored the fact that a growing segment of Thais now meet many of their retail needs through the ubiquitous 7-11, which features national pricing, not varying by region. He also said that in ranking Phuket as a high-cost province meriting the largest wage increase, analysts erred by including in their data expensive tourist restaurants where no minimum wage worker would eat.

In the US, there is a federal [minimum wage](#), but each state is free to establish its own minimum above this rate, and many do. Andrew Puzder, the fast food tycoon, who was until yesterday, President Trump's nominee for Secretary of Labor, has [criticised](#) efforts to increase the national wage floor. Though the federal minimum wage is adopted legislatively, the Secretary of Labor has a critical role in its implementation and enforcement, by promulgating rules under the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) pertaining to the application of minimum wage and overtime (OT) provisions.

Puzder was due to meet with lawmakers today, for a Senate confirmation already postponed four times (more than any other nominee), has decided to [withdraw from consideration](#) as Secretary of Labor. This is amid concerns from Republicans about his personal and business records. Nonetheless, the fact that he was even under consideration is a cautionary tale.

Puzder's CV is a familiar roadmap to Trumpland – a white male CEO with no experience in governance. His Senate confirmation hearings, were delayed at least in part because he failed to submit the required disclosure forms, apparently flummoxed by the level of transparency regarding possible conflicts of interest required of a Cabinet member. Or perhaps, it was indecision on how to spin [his hiring of an undocumented immigrant as a housekeeper](#), and the fact that he only paid legally-required federal employment taxes for her after he had been nominated.

In the alternative facts favoured by the new administration, this was labeled as simply a "[mistake](#)", but Democratic Senator Patty Murray offered a more pointed analysis. "His [Puzder's] decision to pick and choose what laws he himself follows is disqualifying. There simply should not be one set of rules for the Trump Cabinet and another for everyone else," she [told](#) reporters last week.

The Secretary of Labor's impact on domestic policy is clear, but the role's linkage to foreign policy has been less publicly discussed. From taking a stand on whether worker standards are included in trade agreements to weighing in on where nations land on the State Department's Trafficking in Persons (TIP) report, the Department of Labor contributes significantly to US foreign policy, and decisions made by a new secretary will be felt by workers around the world.

Puzder's track record as CEO offers a dismal glimpse into his take on global corporate

responsibility. A key example is palm oil, where demand by the US fast food industry has helped drive [tropical deforestation in Indonesia and Malaysia](#), contributing to global warming and air pollution in Southeast Asia. As part of efforts to promote sustainable palm oil practices, the Union of Concerned Scientists released a score card indicating corporations' commitments to use deforestation-free palm oil. Puzder's Hardees and Carl's Jr brands received [a score of zero](#). Because of disregard for sustainable food practices, as well as his company's sordid history of labour violations, the International Labour Rights Forum (ILRF) recently joined with more than 100 organizations to [oppose Puzder's nomination](#).

Globally-minded consumers should be able to rely on the world's largest economy to help bolster labor standards around the world. Just as I want to be confident that a fashion bargain in Bangkok did not originate in an unregulated [hellhole like Rana Plaza](#), other Americans should be able to eat a burger that does not contribute to the erosion of habitat for diverse species in Southeast Asia. But we can't do this without a firm and vigilant Department of Labor.

Puzder is the first Trump nominee to withdraw in what is becoming an increasingly chaotic Administration. Labor and progressive groups signaled victory, as this was the first instance their efforts were successful in pulling in enough Republican senators to cast doubt on a Trump Cabinet nominee's confirmation.

For American citizens who care about labour standards at home and abroad, it looks like we can put away the black mourning attire for now, in favour of camouflage -- we're going to wage war.

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