

Mexican, U.S. labor officials vow to protect rights of immigrant workers _ legal or not

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Officials with the U.S. Department of Labor and Mexico's Foreign Ministry pledged Monday to protect the rights _ especially fair pay and safe working conditions _ of immigrant workers, whether they are in the United States legally or not.

"It's not the policy of the Department of Labor to penalize and expose workers," said Peter Accolla of the department's Office of Trade Agreement Implementation. "We want to protect them regardless their status."

Accolla joined Bosco Marti, Mexico's Foreign Relations Department's point man on North American affairs, and Mexican consuls from across the United States to review progress made on two agreements between the countries.

One, signed in 2004, sought to increase safety for Hispanic workers in the U.S. The other, signed in May, aims at extending housing and rural development programs to immigrant agricultural workers.

One of the major problems facing immigrant workers is that they don't know their rights under U.S. labor laws and suffer many violations for fear that exposure will mean deportation, Marti said.

"We're trying to create a culture in which they can stop being the object of abuses," Marti said.

The Department of Labor and the Mexican government are collaborating on an outreach campaign to distribute publications that inform immigrants on workplace safety, minimal wages and other rights they have while working in the United States. The publications will also list contact numbers to report violations.

"When immigrants start seeing materials printed with the Mexican government's seal and the U.S. government's seal, they'll realize they have the protection and the support of the governments and that this is not a trap to deport them," Marti said.

Monday's initiative comes five days after the Department of Homeland Security announced a plan to reduce illegal immigration that prominently included "greatly increased interior enforcement of our immigration laws _ including more robust worksite enforcement," according to the Nov. 2 press release.

"If a company is hiring illegal aliens, we're going to go after them," Immigration and Customs Enforcement spokesman Marc Raimondi said Monday. "Our job is clearly and simply to enforce the law."

By reassuring foreign workers that they can look to the U.S. government for protection, Mexican officials said they also hope to drive home the point with Washington that both countries share a responsibility for the well-being of immigrants.

Mexico's lackluster economy does push many workers into the United States, but Mexicans mostly take jobs Americans don't want, Marti said.

"The ultimate goal is an immigration agreement that benefits the U.S. economy and ... that ensures respect for the human and labor rights of the Mexican population that is planting roots in the United States," Marti said.