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# Labor Department to Tighten Scrutiny

By MELANIE TROTTMAN

WASHINGTON -- Labor Secretary Hilda Solis has spent her first few months in office focusing on handing out \$46 billion in stimulus money. Now, her department is adding staff and signaling it will soon begin putting in practice the more assertive regulation of business she promised early in her tenure.

Ms. Solis has begun hiring 670 new investigators to enforce labor regulations.

There will be 150 investigators added in the Wage and Hour division to enforce wage rules and child-labor laws. Another 100 staff will be added to ensure contractors on stimulus projects are in compliance with applicable laws. The additions will boost the division's staff by more than one-third.

The Employee Benefits Security Administration, which helps to regulate private retirement, health and other benefit plans covering 150 million Americans, is adding 75 staffers to conduct nearly 600 more criminal and civil investigations.

Ms. Solis and President Barack Obama also have reversed or postponed some policy decisions made under former President George W. Bush. In April, the labor department postponed a last-minute Bush-era rule that would have required unions to disclose more about their finances. The agency will take more time to consider the rule, which businesses praised and unions said was excessive.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration recently formed a task force to design an enforcement program for severe violators. OSHA will conduct an intensive examination of an employer's inspection history and any systematic problems would trigger additional, mandatory inspections.

OSHA also launched a program to step up inspections of construction sites in Texas after a series of injuries and fatalities.

"The previous administration was not prone to fight on the side of worker protection and we're going in that direction to level the playing field," Ms. Solis said.

Business groups are wary that the playing field will tilt too far, at a time when many businesses are still fighting their way out of economic hard times.

"Employers, especially smaller ones, are really looking for help in terms of understanding the requirements and making sure they're doing things right," said Marc Freedman, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce's executive director of labor law policy. Instead, the department's "rhetoric" on workplace safety "seems to be heavy-handed enforcement and generation of more regulations," he said.

Unions want the agency to get tough on employers and push through new regulations on workplace safety and other

issues they say the previous administration ignored.

As part of the federal stimulus program, the administration was allotted \$575 million for fiscal 2009 to help train workers who have lost their jobs due to foreign trade, and has distributed more than \$470 million since January. The Bush administration was allotted \$220 million in such funds for fiscal 2008. In addition, the program was expanded in mid-May to include more types of workers.

The Obama administration is also naming more of the people who will hold senior posts in the Labor Department, few of whom have business backgrounds, a shift from most of former President Bush's appointees.

M. Patricia Smith, the nominee to be the department's top lawyer, is commissioner for New York State's labor department, and is known as a tough regulator who has stepped up worker protection.

Mr. Obama's nominee to head OSHA, David Michaels, is an epidemiologist and research professor at George Washington University known for studies on the health effects of occupational exposure to toxic chemicals.

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