



Trump's Labor Department pick Andy Puzder could be the key on setting immigration policy

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Donald Trump's pick to the head the Labor Department, CKE Restaurants President Andy Puzder, is a believer in free markets and limited regulation who has backed Trump's argument that immigrant workers have held down wages.

That view of immigration runs contrary to the wishes of the business lobby, which has long supported comprehensive immigration reform. Not that long ago, Puzder was also more open to pro-immigration policies.

As a Cabinet secretary and one of Trump's top advisers on economic issues, Puzder will be a key man figuring out how the new administration's immigration policy affects business. Business groups are cautiously optimistic that the former fast-food magnate will put the focus on issues other than immigration.

"We believe the new administration will find solutions to the ever-changing labor challenges we face, some of which hinges on immigration policy. However, we fully expect Mr. Puzder to first address the most immediate and threatening challenge business owners face today, which is the massive over-regulation of the American economy," said Chip Rogers, president of the Asian-American Hotel Owners Association, the hotel industry's largest trade group.

Immigration policy is mainly the province of the Department of Homeland Security and the Justice Department, but the Labor Department has a significant role since federal worker protection laws cover immigrants, including illegal ones. The department often works with those departments to prosecute employers.

"The Labor Department ... will oversee the writing of regulations for work visas like the H-1B — a big target for restriction in Trump's immigration plan. The Department of Labor's

migration regulations are usually the most onerous, expensive and restrictive of any department involved in the process. He could have major influence over them," said Alex Nowratsh, immigration policy expert for the free-market Cato Institute.

Puzder would come to the job of labor secretary with a lot of practical experience dealing with immigration: CKE Restaurants owns the Hardee's and Carl's Jr. franchises and the fast-food industry is a major employer of immigrants.

During the presidential campaign, he was chief among Trump's surrogates in making the economic case for tougher immigration restrictions. In an Election Day interview on Fox Business Channel, he talked about a hypothetical blue-collar worker who applied for a job only to find that "half the people there speak Spanish."

"Tell that guy that trade and open immigration are in his best interests. They are not in his best interests. They have driven wages down. They have closed access to the middle class," Puzder said, adding later that he did not see an issue with legal immigration.

For any restrictionist immigration policy to work, it would likely have to crack down on the main reason immigrants are drawn to the U.S.: employers. But Puzder has indicated that it could be done solely by penalizing illegal immigrants.

In a pre-election column co-written with Trump advisers Wilbur Ross and Peter Navarro, Puzder called for mandatory minimum prison sentences for illegally crossing the border or overstaying visas. While he slammed "our current corporate donor-driven immigration system," he mentioned no penalties for them.

Before the Trump campaign, however, Puzder supported more welcoming immigration laws. He was a signatory on a 2014 manifesto by the pro-business Partnership for a New American Economy. It said the GOP must be the party that "celebrates hard work and risk taking. Welcoming immigrants who want to come here and contribute to our economy and our society is an important piece of that."

Through a spokeswoman, Puzder declined to be interviewed.

"Puzder was clearly committed to freer immigration in the past and although I can't read his mind, it's difficult to believe that he's actually shifted his opinion on the matter," Nowratsh said.

Matt Patterson, executive director for the Center for Worker Freedom, a part of the conservative group Americans for Tax Reform, argues that Puzder's views are simply pragmatic.

"There's no doubt that illegal immigration coupled with trade deals that ship manufacturing overseas have squeezed the middle class and depressed wages. Puzder has made that case very effectively and I think he's dead serious about it," Patterson said.

He predicted that Puzder would have a "loud and influential voice" on the administration's economic policy. "Trump is smart enough to realize that these issues — trade, labor, immigration — are intimately interconnected and require an approach that treats them as such," he said.

That still leaves open the question of where those policies will fall.

"A lot of us are waiting to see the difference between the Trump campaign and the Trump administration," said Ali Noorani, executive director of the National Immigration Forum.