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Labor group plans picket of immigration office to protest illegal alien problem

by George Hohmann

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A state labor organization plans to picket the federal immigration office on Kanawha Boulevard Friday with an 18-foot-tall blindfolded mouse, claiming the agency is blind to the problem of imported and illegal workers.

Affiliated Construction Trades Foundation Director Steve White said U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, also known as ICE, "is one of the three blind mice. We're saying it's time they do their job."

"We can go to any community in this state any day of the week and see imported workers and what we believe to be illegal activity, and the government is sitting back ignoring the problem," White said. "That's why we're going in front of the ICE office with a blindfolded mouse."

The agency is responsible for the enforcement of federal immigration laws, customs laws and air security laws. It does not have a local office, but another unit of the federal Department of Homeland Security does: U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

Friday's rally will be at noon in front of the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services' office at 210 Kanawha Boulevard W.

The Affiliated Construction Trades Foundation is the research, lobbying and advertising arm of the West Virginia State Building Trades, which consists of 20,000 union construction workers from West Virginia and surrounding counties.

White said, "They (immigration and customs) tell us they are told by Washington they can't go on a construction job site. That's bogus. When local law enforcement catches an illegal person, ICE tells the local law enforcement to let the illegal person go. If local law enforcement catches an illegal person more than once, ICE belittles local law enforcement."

"This has resulted in the emboldenment of what I believe to be unscrupulous employers who undermine our communities by giving away what were good-paying jobs to imported workers at low wages," White said.

Immigration and customs spokeswoman Ernestine Fobbs said the agency's Law Enforcement Support Center provides timely and accurate information and assistance to the federal, state and local law enforcement community 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

In addition, the agency's Pittsburgh office is capable of responding to law enforcement queries 24 hours a day and provides workers and employers with information about what is required to legally hire a person, she said.

The agency is very active in the region, Fobbs said. She cited an announcement last week that the agency was providing \$2.5 million to Pennsylvania law enforcement agencies for their assistance in the investigation of the alleged hiring of illegal aliens by independent contractors who provided cleaning services to Wal-Mart stores throughout the United States from 1998 through 2003.

"We do accept and appreciate input from the public," she said. "We have on our Web site a telephone number (1-866-DHS-2-ICE) we ask people to call if people see something they think is illegal.

"The public perhaps doesn't understand the process or procedure we go through for an investigation to take place," she said. "When you say someone is looking at a worksite and saying people are illegal, that's not how we initiate an investigation. We cannot assume these individuals are illegal. That's profiling. We cannot and do not profile."

When the agency does conduct an investigation, "we do not advertise to anyone this is taking place," Fobbs said.

White cited Columbia Forest Product's Appalachian Precision Hardwood Flooring plant in Logan County as an example of employers importing workers at low wages.

An article in the Sunday Gazette-Mail detailed the company's decision to hire about 20 Hispanic workers as contract laborers for the plant, which has about 200 employees.

In the article, several area people said they would like to work at the plant. A company spokesman said it must import workers because the mining industry has made the local job market unpredictable.

White said, "It is our understanding that workers at that facility have been told to take a \$3-an-hour pay cut or they will be replaced by imported workers."

White said a group of Mexican workers at one sawmill in the state told him they are earning \$6 an hour, "which is less than half of what was paid normally."

"What makes me so mad is, we hear companies say that they can't find people to take these jobs, but they're not telling the whole truth," White said. "They can't find people to take good-paying jobs at only \$6 an hour."

"This should be a good time for West Virginia, particularly being led by an energy economy," he said. "It should be a good time for West Virginians to get a little more pay and benefits and for the state to prosper. Instead, we're being preyed upon by these low-wage salesmen."

"We are not angry with workers who are trying to earn a living and take care of their families," White said. "We're upset with these companies who are giving away West Virginia jobs."

The Sunday Gazette-Mail article reported that the flooring plant in Logan County was built on a \$28 million site with the help of \$6 million in state and federal grants. White said the company is among those on a 2001 list of firms receiving the state's super tax credit.

White said, "It adds insult to injury when we learn that in some cases our tax dollars are being used to put ourselves out of work."

The Affiliated Construction Trades Foundation features a story about imported workers in its August newsletter and has produced a video, "Danger: Underground Economy at Work." The video will air on WCHS-TV at 7 p.m. Saturday and 12:30 p.m. Sunday.

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