

MAKING IT PLAIN

BY KIM BOBO



Mr. DeCamp, Fewer Words, More Fruit

On August 1, the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions held hearings on the nomination of Paul DeCamp for Administrator of the Department of Labor's Wage and Hour Division. Before Congress could fully examine his qualifications, President Bush made a recess appointment on August 31, thus ending Congressional scrutiny. Most Americans have never heard of the Wage and Hour Division, nor Paul DeCamp. Most Americans probably think this position doesn't matter, but it does.

For most non-unionized low-wage workers, the Department of Labor's Wage and Hour Division represents their only defense against unscrupulous employers. It is the agency charged with enforcing the country's overtime and child labor laws, farm labor protections, and the Family Medical Leave Act. And most importantly, it is that which protects them against wage thievery – the most common form of worker exploitation in America.

In Mr. DeCamp's statement to the committee he said that he had an "inherent empathy" for working Americans because he grew up in a working class family and town. He "respects working men and women as well as their families." However, when questioned on his public complaints about the workers who pursue lawsuits to recover their unpaid wages, he replied that his comments were taken out of context and that as director of the Wage and Hour division he would enforce the law.

Unfortunately, actions speak louder than words. Or as the Gospels say, you will know people by their "fruit," by their deeds of kindness and justice, and not by their words.

Mr. DeCamp may have great empathy and respect for workers, but he has done little in his professional life to support or protect them. He has defended Wal-Mart, a company notorious for its union busting policies and refusal to provide its employees with a living wage. He has supported proposed changes to overtime laws that would reduce protections for workers. And there is no record of him ever having advocated for the strengthening or expansion of worker protections.

The Wage and Hour Division needs more than just someone who has empathy. It needs a leader – someone who will fight to protect working men and women; someone who will develop partnerships with the religious community to design new and creative ways to protect workers.

Personnel cutbacks over the last decade have reduced the agency's ability to respond to workers' needs in a timely fashion, or to aggressively protect those workers whose complaints of unethical treatment go unmade for fear of losing their jobs. The next director of the agency must be willing to secure the resources necessary so that it is staffed sufficiently.

Paul DeCamp may be a smart man. He may also be empathetic. But is he prepared to be the nation's number one enforcer of wage laws and protector of low-wage workers?

Nonetheless, he has the job, and Interfaith Worker Justice will do its best to build a relationship with him. No organization believes more strongly in the importance of the Wage and Hour Division than IWJ. We pray that Mr. DeCamp will embrace the magnitude of the position.

That said, he'll likely need a primer as he takes office. So to that end, I sent a letter recommending the following visits for his orientation schedule:

As the Gospels say, you will know people by their "fruit," by their deeds of kindness and justice, and not by their words.

1. **New Orleans.** Talk to the thousands engaged in the cleanup and recovery who are not getting paid for their work. He must make sure to take a translator with him because half of the workers are Spanish speaking.
2. **A workers' center.** The nearly 150 that have sprung up across the country have two functions: to protect workers and pick up the Department of Labor's slack, of which there is an increasing amount.
3. **Anywhere there are career Wage and Hour investigators.** Find out how long it takes your agency to respond to complaints in cities like Miami, Chicago, Los Angeles or Houston.
4. **Chicago.** Interfaith Worker Justice will convene a meeting with national worker advocates and workers' center leaders to discuss opportunities for collaboration as well as how to reform industries where law violations are prevalent.

Paul DeCamp is not yet prepared for this important job. For the sake of those whose lives are most affected by the position he will soon attempt to fill, let's hope that he is trainable.