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LABOR OFFICIALS OFFER PRAISE, CRITICISM ON IMMIGRATION ACTION

By Melanie Trottman
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Labor officials, who hope to organize more immigrant workers in the coming years, largely applauded President Barack Obama's executive action on immigration but had some critiques and quickly warned Congress they'd keep fighting for related legislation.

The officials said the new action, which will give more than four million illegal immigrants the chance to apply for work permits and a temporary reprieve from deportation, will help improve wages and working conditions for immigrants and others.

It "will help prevent unscrupulous employers from using unprotected workers to drive down wages and conditions for all workers in our country," said Richard Trumka, president of the AFL-CIO, a federation of 56 labor unions.

Still, many immigrants don't qualify for the work authorization and will remain vulnerable to exploitations such as wage theft or retaliation when they try to complain, said labor leaders, calling the executive action just a first step and vowing to fight for legislation to provide a path to citizenship and better protections for immigrant workers.

"Tomorrow we continue our fight in actions across the country to unite and organize for comprehensive immigration reform," Service Employees International Union President Mary Kay Henry said Thursday night. Her union has about two million members, including about one-fourth who are Hispanic and many who are Latin American immigrants. "Only Congress can pass a long-term fix to our broken immigration system," said Ms. Henry. She blamed Republicans for blocking progress and said if they don't change "we will hold them accountable in the streets and at the ballot box in 2016."

Unions have been seeking an overhaul of immigration laws in part because of the hope that they can organize more immigrant workers, especially newly legalized ones who might be more likely to join. Union membership has become stagnant after years of declines and America's demographics are changing. The percentage of all wage and salary U.S. workers in a union, at 11.3% in 2013, is roughly half what it was 30 years ago. As of early last year, Hispanic union membership had jumped 21% over the prior 10 years while white membership had fallen nearly 13%, according to Labor Department statistics.

Mr. Trumka and other labor leaders said they're concerned by what they called Mr. Obama's "concession to corporate demands" for more access to temporary visas, which they said will allow the continued suppression of tech-sector wages. The Communications Workers of America union said that through the new rulemaking process that was added as a part of the executive action, it will press "for fair treatment and protections for both U.S. and foreign-born tech workers." Mr. Obama's so-called concessions fell short of what businesses wanted.

President Obama also drew criticism for his timing. United Food and Commercial Workers Union President Joe Hansen called the action "belated."

"Our members and their families have persevered through raids and deportations" for years, he said.

Rep. John Kline (R., Minn.), Chairman of the House Education and the Workforce Committee, said President Obama's unilateral action is a "brazen disregard for the rule of law and the constitutional limits of his office."

Americans have made clear they want Congress to work together to end gridlock, said Mr. Kline. "Unless the president changes course, we will lose an opportunity to advance reforms that would make a difference in the lives of students and working families. The president is determined to let that opportunity slip away," said Mr. Kline.