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Labor Nominee Dismisses Fears of Political Pressure

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WASHINGTON -- President Trump's second pick to lead the Labor Department told senators on Wednesday that he would not allow partisan political considerations or conservative ideologues to shape his department, pushing back against accusations by Democrats that he had looked away as subordinates at the Justice Department stacked his office with ideological allies during the George W. Bush administration.

R. Alexander Acosta, the nominee for labor secretary, also defended his decision as the United States attorney in Southern Florida to offer a lenient plea deal to a wealthy New Yorker accused of paying underage girls for sexual acts.

For nearly three hours in front of the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, Mr. Acosta, 48, defended his record, explained how he might deal with budget cuts to the department and dismissed the concerns of several senators who asked how he would avoid any pressure from the president to pass policies based on politics and not on the best interest of workers. Mr. Acosta, who would be the only Hispanic in Mr. Trump's cabinet, promised not to evaluate workers based on their political leanings.

"If confirmed, I will work to enforce the laws under the department's jurisdiction fully and fairly," Mr. Acosta said in his opening pitch to senators. "As a former prosecutor, I will always be on the side of the law and not any particular constituency."

Mr. Acosta, the dean of Florida International University's law school, was nominated after the president's first choice for labor secretary, the fast-food executive Andrew F. Puzder, withdrew from consideration after coming under fire for past labor practices and domestic abuse allegations. Mr. Acosta, a former prosecutor from Miami who headed the Justice Department's civil rights division, appeared to be a far less contentious choice.

But Democratic senators did not go easy on him. Senator Patty Murray of Washington, the ranking Democrat on the committee, wanted more details on his promise not to politicize the department.

"I expect our next secretary of labor to be someone who can withstand inappropriate political pressure, and prioritize workers and the mission of the Labor Department over, hypothetically speaking, President Trump's business associates or Steve Bannon's frightening ideology," she said, referring to the senior White House adviser.

She and other Democrats pointed to a 2008 report by the Justice Department's in-house investigator, which found that under Mr. Acosta his office had violated federal law and department policies by weighing political affiliations in hiring and assessing employees.

Mr. Acosta acknowledged that the violations had happened on his watch but said that the report laid most of the blame on a subordinate, Bradley Schlozman.

"Political views in the hiring of career attorneys and staff should not be used," Mr. Acosta said. "If I am asked to do that, I will not allow it."

Mr. Acosta had a lengthy discussion with Senator Tim Kaine, Democrat of Virginia, on what critics said was the lenient plea deal given to Jeffrey E. Epstein, a wealthy financier accused of paying underage girls for sexual massages. Mr. Acosta defended the deal and said it was offered based on the evidence. Mr. Epstein, he noted, was required to register as a sex offender.

Mr. Acosta also seemed to question Mr. Trump's proposal to cut the Labor Department's budget by 21 percent, saying he opposed across-the-board cuts as well as targeting specific programs.

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