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Trump Nominates Keith Sonderling to Lead the Department of Labor

November Elections and the PRO Act



Trump Makes His Labor Pick

The person who has been steering federal labor policy for the past two months could soon hold the job for the rest of the administration, and the classification rules that shape the owner-operator business sit squarely in his portfolio.

Here's what you need to know.

The background

On June 29, President Trump announced he will nominate Keith Sonderling as Secretary of Labor. Sonderling has run the department in an acting capacity since Lori Chavez-DeRemer stepped down in April, and this move will grant him the role permanently. The nomination now goes to the Senate for confirmation.

Sonderling is not a new face at the agency. He was confirmed as deputy labor secretary last year, and during Trump's first term he held posts at the Department of Labor's Wage and Hour Division and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Wage and Hour is the same office that writes and enforces the independent contractor rule.

Why it matters here

The Wage and Hour Division decides how the independent contractor test gets applied. That is the same rulemaking covered in earlier updates, the proposal that would restore the 2021 economic realities framework and its two core factors of control and opportunity for profit or loss.

For owner-operators, the direction of that rulemaking is what stands between the current independent model and a stricter standard that could pull drivers into employee status against their will. Having someone in charge who knows that specific division, and who has been part of moving the friendlier rule forward, points toward continuity rather than another reversal.

Confirmation

Senate approval is required, and it is not automatic. Sonderling's confirmation as deputy secretary last year ran 53 to 46 along party lines. A similar margin would put him in the top job, though confirmation votes can take time to schedule.

The acting-versus-permanent distinction matters too. An acting secretary can keep the department running and advance work already underway, while a Senate-confirmed secretary carries fuller authority and a longer runway to see a rule through to the finish.

Bottom line

For owner-operators and small trucking businesses, the takeaway is welcome stability at the top of the agency that governs federal classification standards. The proposed independent contractor rule, which trucking groups have largely praised for protecting the owner-operator model, is still working toward a final version, and the person overseeing it would now be someone with a direct hand in it rather than a newcomer.

TIE has signed onto a Coalition for a Democratic Workplace letter encouraging the Senate to quickly confirm Sonderling. We will track the nomination as it moves forward.

What Democratic Wins in November Would Mean for the Owner-Operator Model

Control of Congress could flip in this November's elections, and one bill waiting in the wings would rewrite the rules of independent contracting in a way that hits owner-operators directly.

Here's what you need to know.

The situation

Republicans hold the House by a thin margin, currently 218 to 212. Democrats need a net gain of just four seats to take control. History leans their way, since the party that holds the White House almost always loses House seats in the midterms, and forecasters currently rate Democrats as the favorites to win the chamber.

If that happens, a long-standing labor priority moves back to center stage: the PRO Act, reintroduced in the current Congress by Rep. Bobby Scott (D-VA) and backed by union leadership.

How the bill affects trucking

The PRO Act would import the ABC test into federal labor law. That is the same stringent standard now on the books in New Jersey and California, and it presumes a worker is an employee unless the hiring company can satisfy all three prongs.

The hardest prong for trucking is the requirement that the work fall outside the company's usual course of business. For an independent contractor working for a carrier, implementation of the ABC test can be enough to reclassify a driver as an employee, which is why the standard is widely viewed as incompatible with the owner-operator model.

The safeguard

Winning the House is not the same as passing the bill. The PRO Act cleared the House twice before, in 2020 and 2021, and died both times in the Senate, where most legislation needs 60 votes to break a filibuster.

Even a slim Democratic majority in the Senate will be difficult to achieve this cycle, and the 60 votes needed looks completely out of reach. Even so, a simple majority would change the picture. The real risk to watch is not a clean floor vote but pieces of the PRO Act getting attached to other legislation.

Bottom line

A Democratic House would not flip the owner-operator model overnight, but it would revive a serious federal threat to independent contractor status and keep it alive as a bargaining chip. For drivers who value running their own business, the classification fight does not end at the ballot box in November.

TIE will continue to monitor the elections and any attempt to move ABC-test language through Congress.

Truckers Integral to Our Economy is a 501©4 dedicated to the preservation of the independent contractor model in the trucking industry. For more information, contact Scott Brenner @ sbrenner@crshq.com or www.truckerchoice.org.