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He's fighting for the organized—and the unorganized

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Jorge Ramirez, head of the Chicago Federation of Labor, wants to establish a Chicago office to enforce wage and hour laws.

Jorge Ramirez, 46, heads the Chicago Federation of Labor, an organization with 320 affiliates representing workers from pilots to doctors to zookeepers to the organist who plays at Blackhawks home games. The federation, which is backing a former alderman's bid to buy the Chicago Sun-Times, also is pushing to establish a Chicago Office of Labor Standards to enforce wage and hour laws. The son of a union local official, Ramirez, who once attended a Catholic seminary, lives in Lemont with his wife and four sons.

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Why does Chicago need an Office of Labor Standards when both state and federal departments of labor are charged with enforcing labor law?

It would essentially be a way for workers to address their concerns. It would give some type of ability for them to have a voice, or to have some venue where they could come and say, "I was wronged." The traditional methods for this, even in organized labor, have been lacking to some degree.

Does your faith inform the work you do today?

Absolutely. I grew up, actually, with the Spanish version of "**Rerum Novarum**," an encyclical (on capital and labor) written by Pope Leo the XIII. My father relied on that heavily.

I hear you're a baker. What do you like about it?

It's a little bit different from cooking because baking is a slower, longer process. You seem to forget about everything. You get to put everything aside for a second—you focus on the baking because you're doing it usually for somebody you care for.

What do you bake?

A killer cheesecake that folks tell me I should market. If I could sell enough of those, maybe I wouldn't have to do this. I would do a cheesecake throw-down with anybody, **with Eli's**.

What misconception about the labor movement nettles you most?

I don't think the press ever characterizes a lot of the work that we do right. I'll give you an example: We've run programs in the jail for over 21 years. We're trying to get incarcerated people meaningful jobs and careers when they come out of prison to lower the recidivism rate. We don't get credit for doing that.

Brothers and sisters?

I'm one of six. We're the Mexican Brady Bunch. I'm Bobby.



"Compared to us, Donny and Marie are Cheech and Chong!" — Bobby Brady

That was going to be my next question. What are you reading now?

"The Powerhouse" by Steve Levine. It's about the race for the lithium-ion battery.

Introvert or extrovert?

My job doesn't allow me to be an introvert, but I think I'm a private person. I do what I have to do to represent our folks, but I'm a homebody.

Talk to me about labor and immigration.

Most immigrants don't come here to vacation. They come here to work. They come here for a better life. It's such an ignorant, over-simplistic way to look at it: "Oh, they're taking American jobs." Really? Really? You know what a chicken catcher gets? There are positions in slaughterhouses—eviscerator, the gut-snatcher. That's a job title.

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