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Walker: American jobs top priority in deciding whether to continue legal immigration

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GRAND CHUTE -- Gov. Scott Walker says he's in favor of continuing to allow legal immigration into the U.S. if "first and foremost we protect American workers and American wages."

"If that can be done, then certainly we can continue to have legal immigration," Walker told reporters Wednesday afternoon near Appleton, "but we should make sure that American workers and American jobs and American wages are our No. 1 priority."

Walker has faced questions this week on whether he has moved further right on immigration following comments he made during an interview with conservative Glenn Beck. Some interpreted those comments as a sign Walker favors new restrictions on legal immigration.

Walker at one time indicated support for a pathway to citizenship for those who already are in the country illegally. But he said earlier this year he changed his position.

Asked Wednesday if he backs visas that let U.S. employers hire highly educated foreign workers for specialty occupations, Walker replied, "Again, with the same criteria -- I mean, to me, it's all about protecting American jobs and American workers and American wages. If we can do so in a way that does protect those things, then certainly we're open to that."

Walker said his immigration views aren't new.

"Some are a little surprised nationally, it sounds like it's something new, it's not -- I've said it in the past," Walker said.

Walker, who met with Wisconsin reporters for the first time in almost three weeks on Earth Day, refused to answer whether he believes in man-made climate change.

He was in Grand Chute for a groundbreaking ceremony for a new plant for Neenah-based Werner Electric Supply, which has 11 other locations in Wisconsin and Michigan. Walker said he "believes the government needs to balance a sustainable economy and a sustainable environment."

"I'm going to talk about things we can do that both sustain the environment here -- that allows a healthy environment but at the same time we're able to sustain the economy, and I think there's got to be a positive balance and that's really what the debate in this state and this country should be on -- how to do both," Walker said.

Asked what he would say to 57 Wisconsin DNR workers who've been told this week they could potentially lose their jobs, Walker replied, "We believe going forward that science should drive decisions at the Department of Natural Resources, but that we do it on an as-needed basis, so when an issue comes up that requires a report, we can contract for that as opposed to have a component of that agency that just does reports whether they're needed or not."

Walker said he predicts state revenue numbers will reveal "a little bit of revenue for us to work with, but I don't think there's going to be a huge amount." He said the first priority for the state budget should be K-12 public education and holding down taxes. Asked if some funds might be restored to the UW System, Walker replied that K-12 education is more important.

-- *By Kay Nolan*
For WisPolitics.com