

Statement of Hilda L. Solis
United States Secretary of Labor -designate
Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions
United States Senate
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Chairman Kennedy, Senator Enzi, and Members of the Committee:

I appreciate the opportunity to testify before the Committee today and for the opportunity to have spoken with many of you over the past several days. I am deeply honored and grateful to the President-elect for designating me to serve as the Secretary of Labor, subject to confirmation by the Senate.

Over the course of the campaign, the President-elect often spoke of his commitment to improving the lives of working people. His desire to serve working Americans brought him to politics. I share his commitment. Like the President-elect, I entered public life to improve opportunities for families like mine --- hard-working families eager to realize the American Dream.

This is an especially difficult moment for middle-class families in America, increasing numbers of whom are losing their homes, their jobs, and their retirement savings. The latest unemployment reports from the Bureau of Labor Statistics confirm what we all have felt for some time: the economy is in a severe recession and shedding jobs at an alarming rate. In November alone, approximately half a million jobs were lost --- the largest monthly payroll loss since the 1970's. Unemployment has reached 6.7 percent and, even more disturbing, the numbers of long-term unemployed --- those who have been unemployed for more than six months --- has risen to about one in four of all unemployed workers.

Because American workers were already in a weak position when the recession began, middle class families have no real cushion with which to absorb these repeated blows. When we entered this recession, household debt was already at an historic high, and household income had been stagnant or falling for several years. Although the economy expanded from 2001 to December of 2007, the share of the civilian population that is employed did not increase, and teenage employment actually fell.

You have my solemn commitment that, if confirmed, I will work hard every day to make sure that middle-class families do not lose hope. My job as Secretary of Labor will be to help make the American Dream a reality for millions more families. I am eager to begin that important work.

My passion for improving opportunities for middle-class Americans is the product of my life story. I am one of seven children born in La Puente, a town in the San Gabriel Valley. My mother emigrated from Nicaragua and my father worked as a laborer, a farmworker, a railroad worker and a Teamsters shop steward in a battery recycling plant.

From a young age, my parents instilled in my siblings and me the value of hard work, public service and commitment to family. For much of my childhood, my mother was a stay-at-home mom. After my youngest sisters were born, however, she had to take a job at a nearby Mattel toy factory to help make ends meet. Like many parents, my parents sacrificed throughout our childhood so my siblings and I could live up to our potential to achieve whatever our talents would allow. My father was a Teamsters shop steward who regularly told us about the opportunities his union association would bring to help secure our family a place in America's middle class.

Though our family could not afford college, my parents stressed education. I was the first in my family to graduate from college, something that would have been impossible without Pell Grants and Federal guaranteed student loans, along with the sacrifices made by my parents. I am very proud of my siblings' considerable accomplishments, including one sister with a PhD in public health and two sisters who are engineers.

For most of my adult life I have lived in El Monte, California, a city near where I was born. I am proud to have had the opportunity, as the Director of the California Student Opportunity and Access Program and as a Trustee of Rio Hondo College, to give students the same opportunities to get a college degree that I had. Every child should have that opportunity and every parent should have the chance to see their dreams realized.

In 1992, I was elected to the California State Assembly and, in 1994, I became the first Latina State Senator in California. I authored a record 17 laws to protect victims of domestic violence, championed worker rights, helped small businesses, and sought to strengthen the economy. The fact that I have had the opportunity to serve the people of California in the state legislature and the U.S. House of Representatives --- and the fact that I am sitting here today --- is proof that anything is possible in America. Anything is possible through hard work, the sustenance of a loving family, and the support of a government that sees every child and every family as an asset to be valued for the benefit of all of us. I believe we must work together to help make sure that, despite tough economic times, this path to opportunity remains open for every American in our nation's diverse workforce.

Unfortunately, the current crisis is making the American Dream harder to realize. Over the last few years, middle-class families across this nation have been challenged by rising unemployment, stagnant wages, and a housing crisis. In the communities around my home town in the San Gabriel Valley, frustration and fear have grown as wages have failed to keep up with the rising costs of basic needs and unemployment rates have exceeded ten percent.

Families are struggling in the face of wage disparities, which significantly impact women of color. A Latina earns on average 57 cents for every dollar that a man earns. An African-American woman earns just 68 cents for every dollar that a man earns. These wage disparities directly contribute to a cycle of poverty and lower retirement savings and Social Security benefits for women throughout their lifetime.

Our servicemen and women also face significant challenges. Increasing numbers of young veterans are returning from combat in Iraq and Afghanistan with disabilities and long-lasting injuries. This includes the more than one-third of the 230,000 new veterans who have applied for medical assistance from the Veterans' Affairs Department and suffer from traumatic brain injuries. I have seen first hand the challenges these servicemen and women and their families face in reintegrating into the workforce.

If confirmed, I will join the President-elect's team as a voice for America's middle-class families and workers. I will work with my colleagues in the Cabinet and the White House and members of Congress --- most particularly the members of this Committee --- to restore people's faith and confidence in our economy and rebuild their sense of security. The Labor Department can and should be a critical contributor to our nation's economic future. If confirmed, I will be ready to lead the Department in this important effort.

Among the many ways in which the Labor Department can contribute, I would like to highlight four areas that will be a particular focus of my time as Secretary of Labor, if I am confirmed. I will not neglect any part of the Department's mission. But these are my priorities as I contemplate where to begin this important work.

First, the Labor Department must expand the skills development and job search assistance it provides to all workers so that their employment opportunities will expand and their earnings will grow and employers will have the skilled workforces they need to succeed. If we are going to create or preserve millions of jobs, we must assure that American workers are ready, willing, and able to perform those jobs at the highest level of productivity. American workers are the most productive workers in the world. They are doing their part. We must do our part.

If confirmed, I will work with President-elect Obama, my colleagues in the Cabinet, and you to reinvest in and restructure workforce development, build effective career ladders for at-risk youth and other underserved populations, and support high-growth industries by training the workers they need. This includes promoting "green-collar jobs" --- that is, jobs that will provide economic security for middle-class families while securing our energy supply and combating climate change. It also includes an unemployment insurance system which provides workers with the income support and the job-training opportunities they need to assure that losing a job does not mean permanently falling out of the middle class.

Second, the Labor Department must assure that American workers get the pay they have earned working in safe, healthy, and fair workplaces. The Labor Department is charged with assuring compliance with dozens of employment laws. I believe these laws codify values that are fundamental to our society. A fair day's work deserves a fair day's pay. Workers should not have to sacrifice their lives or their health to keep their jobs. Workers need time and flexibility to care for their families and themselves. These are American values. They must be America's ordinary way of doing business.

Third, the crisis in retirement security demands solutions. The Labor Department and its sister agency, the Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation, should be in the forefront of finding that

solution. We must expand retirement savings, assure that existing pension plans are secure, and provide retirees and workers with the information they need to make good decisions about how to invest for a future beyond work.

Finally, but just as important as my other priorities, the Labor Department must assure that the door to opportunity is open to every American regardless of race, sex, veteran status, or disability. The Labor Department is one important part of the federal government's civil rights enforcement and compliance infrastructure. If confirmed, the Labor Department's message will be clear and simple: no unjust barrier should keep any worker from achieving the American Dream.

In particular, I will work with my colleagues in the Cabinet to assure that we welcome home the heroes returning from Iraq and Afghanistan --- including our heroes with disabilities --- and provide them with the job training and adjustment assistance they deserve. On the battlefields of war, our soldiers pledge to leave no one behind. For all veterans, past, present, and future, this must be our pledge: after our servicemen and women come home, we leave no veteran behind. This includes ensuring economic security.

In closing, let me express my sincere hope that this is the beginning of a dialogue with the members of this Committee. You have my commitment that, if confirmed, I will listen and respond to your concerns. My door will always be open to you and your colleagues in the House and Senate. We may not always agree. But I promise that I will not let those disagreements get in the way of the pursuit of our common goal --- a genuine opportunity for every family to achieve the American Dream.

I look forward to working with each of you if I am confirmed and I thank you for your consideration.