



A Quantum Of Solis

Insights

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President Obama has selected Hilda L. Solis as his choice for Secretary of Labor. Solis has been a Democratic member of the U.S. House of Representatives for the past seven years, representing a district just east of Los Angeles, California. While Solis's confirmation was delayed because of questions concerning her husband's business, she is widely expected to be confirmed by the Senate. Labor leaders throughout the country are ecstatic; business leaders, not so much. In this article we'll take a look at some of the more important aspects of her career.

Early Career

Solis was born in Los Angeles in 1957 and is one of seven siblings and the daughter of Nicaraguan and Mexican parents. She earned a bachelor's degree at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona and a Master's degree at the University of Southern California.

She served in the Carter White House in the Office of Hispanic Affairs and later became an analyst with the Office of Management and Budget. She was elected as a member of the California State Assembly in 1992 and after one term won election to the California State Senate before entering the U. S. House in 2001. In the California legislature, she became well known for authoring bills to prevent domestic violence. She was the first Hispanic woman ever to serve in the state's senate.

While Solis identifies herself as a Roman Catholic, she is pro-choice. She also signed a "Statement of Principles," released to the public on February 28, 2006, which affirmed Catholic Democrats' commitment to their faith, but said that they disagreed with the Church on some issues. They stated that on those issues, such as abortion rights, they decided to follow their conscience instead of the Church teachings.

Comments About Solis . . . Diverge

Among other things, AFL-CIO President John Sweeny has said: "We're thrilled at the prospect of having Rep. Hilda Solis as our nation's next labor secretary" and "The AFL-CIO looks forward to working with Rep. Solis as she charts new territory for our nation's working men and women."

Business leaders have not been quite as enthusiastic. Mark Mix, President of the National Right to Work Committee, said the selection of Solis is "very disturbing news for America's independent-minded workers" and that she has "carried water for Big Labor and voted in favor of every forced unionism power grab that has come before her."

Justin Wilson, an analyst for the Center for Union Facts, said that her co-sponsorship of the Employee Free Choice Act "signals that Obama's Department of Labor will tow the line for union bosses."

Here are Ms. Solis's positions on several key labor issues; you can draw your own conclusions.

Increasing the Federal Minimum Wage

Throughout her career, Solis has been a staunch advocate for increasing the federal minimum wage. As a California State Senator in 1996, she led the fight to increase California's minimum wage. In the U.S. House, she cosponsored the Fair Minimum Wage Act, an important piece of the "first 100 hours" legislation that the new Democratic majority passed. In May of 2007, the federal minimum wage increase to \$7.25/hour was signed into law.

Expanding union rights in the workplace

She is a strong supporter of workers' rights to unionize and co-sponsored the Employee Free Choice Act. This legislation would take away workers' rights to vote in a secret ballot election to select a union as their sole representative, significantly changes the rules of collective bargaining and adopts substantial monetary penalties for employer misconduct.

Honoring Labor Leaders

She authored legislation to recognize specific labor-union leaders. For example, she wrote a law which passed in May, 2008 to authorize the Department of Interior to study lands important in the life of Cesar Chavez and introduced a resolution to honor Dolores Huerta for her commitment to the improvement of labor conditions for farm workers.

Free Trade

Throughout her career, she has worked to end sweatshop conditions at home and abroad and protect American jobs. She strongly opposes any trade agreement which does not include protections for labor, environmental, and human rights. She voted to suspend fast track procedures for the U.S.-Colombia Free Trade Agreement (FTA), because of alleged workers' rights violations and other human rights issues in Colombia. She also voted against the U.S.-Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) and against granting the President "Fast Track" trade negotiating authority.

Preventing Workplace Injuries

She was a cosponsor of the Protecting America's Workers Act, which would significantly alter the Occupational Safety and Health Act. This proposed legislation increases penalties against employers for safety violations, enhances protections for whistleblowers, provides for involvement of third parties in the settlement process and mandates that employers pay for personal protective equipment for employees.

Extending Unemployment Benefits

In parts of her Congressional District, the unemployment rate has reached 9%. In June, 2008, she voted for the 13-week extension of unemployment benefits for workers who lost their jobs in our nation's struggling economy.

Spending Federal Funds For "Green-Collar" Jobs and Training Program

She has been a strong supporter of investment in "green collar" jobs. These jobs include green building, energy-efficiency retrofit and service, and renewable energies such as wind, solar and bio-fuels. She authored legislation to provide \$125 million for green-collar job training, with an emphasis on impoverished communities.

Preventing Corporate Corruption

Solis believes that corporate fraud and mismanagement has resulted in massive layoffs. Therefore, she support further legislation to hold executives accountable and to impose governmental restrictions on corporations and the capital markets.

Conclusion

Employers should read President Obama's selection of Solis as Labor Secretary as a clear signal of changes to come at the Department of Labor. Her positions on increasing the minimum wage and unemployment, favoring unions in the workplace, opposing free trade, spending federal monies for training programs and generally imposing more restrictions on employers and management rightfully should cause concern for employers.

Change is coming and employers would be well advised to get their houses in order now to avoid becoming the target of more aggressive regulations and enforcement strategies in the near future.

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