

Union Women Eager for Solis to Start Her Work

By Sharon Johnson

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(WOMENSENEWS)--Rep. Hilda L. Solis' pending confirmation as secretary of labor this week has union women's hopes up.

"During the Bush administration, working women were left to fend for themselves; but under Solis, that will change because she understands the challenges personally as well as professionally," says Anna Burger, secretary-treasurer of the Washington-based Service Employees International Union, which has more than 2 million members, 1.1 million of whom are women. "Although the department has had a women's bureau for more than 60 years, many secretaries of labor have given little attention to developing policies and procedures that enable women to support themselves and balance work and family responsibilities."

Solis, who was nominated in December, has faced opposition from some Republican members of the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee over her stance on labor issues. One senator on the committee has blocked a vote on her nomination by anonymously placing a hold on it last week.

If she manages to win confirmation, Solis is expected to be more aggressive in the implementation of occupational health and safety precautions than her Republican predecessor, Elaine Chao, the only member of President Bush's cabinet to serve a full eight years. Burger is ready for that.

"We need new laws that will protect flight attendants who are suffering severe hearing loss because of jet noise and child care providers who work in other people's homes," Burger says, adding that the only new regulations on workplace hazards in recent years have been required by the courts. "Most of the laws on the books are designed for workers in manufacturing jobs that are disappearing."

Burger also hopes that Solis will make enforcement of pay equity legislation a top priority. The Lilly Ledbetter bill passed the Senate by a margin of 61 Democrats to 36 Republicans Jan. 22 after overcoming a series of hostile Republican amendments. Sen. Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, the Republican minority leader who is married to Chao, had threatened to filibuster the Ledbetter bill because he had claimed it would increase the likelihood of litigation.

"As a member of the California Legislature, Solis pushed for pay equity legislation," says Burger. "She also marched with our union in Los Angeles to support low-income workers, many of them women, because she wanted them to have the same opportunities she has had."

Solis appeared before the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee Jan. 9. The ranking Republican member, Sen. Michael B. Enzi of Wyoming, is reviewing her written answers to several follow-up questions. Another Republican on the committee, Sen. Orrin B. Hatch of Utah, has said he will support Solis' confirmation.

Once her nomination goes to the full Senate for a vote, Solis could face more roadblocks from Republicans.

Sixth Woman in the Post

If confirmed, Solis would be the sixth woman to lead the department, which has a \$10.5 billion budget and over 15,000 employees. More women have served as labor secretary than any other cabinet post.

Under Solis, the Department of Labor is expected to increase its budget for enforcement of the federal minimum wage law of \$7.25 per hour, which will take effect July 24. Under the Bush administration, spending for enforcement decreased 13 percent. The majority of minimum-wage workers in the United States are women.

Hilda L. Solis

"One of seven children, Solis was the first in her family to go to college," says Maria Elena Durazo, executive secretary-treasurer of the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor, AFL-CIO. "As the First Hispanic woman to serve in the California State Senate and a former chair of the bipartisan Congressional Caucus for Women's Issues, Solis championed increases in the minimum wage and work force training that are a lifeline for these women."

After receiving her master's degree in public administration from the University of Southern California, in Los Angeles, Solis served as an assistant in the White House Office of Hispanic Affairs under President Jimmy Carter and as an analyst in the Office of Management and Budget.

From 1992 to 1994, she served in the California State Assembly and the California State Senate from 1994 to 2000. In addition to authoring 17 state laws aimed at combating domestic violence, Solis led the battle that increased the state's hourly minimum wage from \$4.25 to \$5.75 in 1996.


Solis was so committed to raising the minimum wage that she used money from her campaign chest to fund the signature-gathering operation, which placed the measure on the ballot.

In 1997, Solis overcame the strong opposition of former Republican Gov. Pete Wilson and the California business community to win environmental protections for communities of color that suffered

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health problems because of haphazard enforcement of environmental laws.

In 2000, Sen. Edward Kennedy, D-Mass., who chairs the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, presented Solis with the John F. Kennedy Profile in Courage Award for spearheading this legislation. The first woman to receive the award, Solis donated the \$25,000 prize to local environmental groups.

At her Jan. 9 confirmation hearing, Solis told the Senate labor committee that job training, especially for the unemployed and returning veterans, would be her top priority. A vote is expected later this week.

The United States lost 2.6 million jobs in 2008, the worst year for job loss since 1945. In December the unemployment rate for women soared to 5.9 percent.

Women are hard hit by job loss, Solis told the committee. The typical woman earns 77 cents for every \$1 earned by a man and has fewer financial resources to withstand unemployment.

Parents Met in Citizenship Class

The 51-year-old daughter of a Mexican shop steward and a Nicaraguan assembly line worker who met in a citizenship class, Solis was first elected to Congress in 2000 and represents a largely Hispanic and Asian district of suburbs east of Los Angeles.

The secretary of labor will be one of the most important positions in the Obama administration, predicts Debbie Walsh, director of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, in New Brunswick.

"The economy is the No. 1 issue facing the country," says Walsh. "Like Frances Perkins--the first secretary of labor appointed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in the Great Depression--Solis will be responsible for coming up with solutions to serious problems like rising unemployment and stagnant wages."

Maria Elena Durazo, executive secretary-treasurer of the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor, AFL-CIO, which represents over 800,000 workers, says Solis would be a strong advocate for low-income and immigrant women.

"There's no better public official to ensure that low-income female workers will be included in the plans of President Obama and Congress to revitalize the economy with green jobs that pay excellent salaries and benefits," says Durazo. "Solis authored the Green Jobs Act of 2007, which was intended to secure up to \$125 million in funding for federal and state green job-training programs, including a special provision for job training in low-income communities."

Supports Bill to Ease Unionizing

Some Republican senators have opposed Solis' confirmation because of her support for the Employee Free Choice Act, which would make it easier for workers to unionize.

Although it is illegal, one-fourth of employers facing organizing drives fire at least one worker who supports the union, according to Rep. George Miller, the California Democrat who chairs the House Education and Labor Committee and supports the bill, which would also establish civil fines up to \$20,000 per violation against employers who violate workers' rights during an organizing campaign.

Unions and businesses are spending millions of dollars to influence the shape of policy in the 111th Congress.

In 2007, Solis voted for the bill, but it failed in the Senate.

"My father's membership in the Teamsters union helped my family have health and other benefits even when times were tough," Solis said at her confirmation hearing.

Solis has voted with the AFL-CIO 97 percent of the time. Labor unions are her leading supporters, contributing \$888,050 to her campaigns since she first ran for Congress in 1999, according to the Washington-based Center for Responsible Politics, a nonprofit that monitors campaign contributions.

"Union membership is a major plus for women because they earn higher wages and are more likely to have health insurance, pensions and other benefits," says Geri Jenkins, co-president of the Oakland-based California Nurses Association/National Nurses Organizing Committee, which has over 80,000 members in 50 states and has organized over 19,000 nurses at 50 hospitals since 2000.

"But under the current law, employers discourage women from joining unions by using intimidating tactics like hiring replacements and conducting one-on-one meetings with supervisors who threaten to fire workers."

- Johnson is a New York freelance writer.

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