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# As Labor Secretary, Finding Influence in Her Past

By [STEVEN GREENHOUSE](#)

[Hilda L. Solis](#) often recalls some advice her high school guidance counselor gave her mother: “Your daughter is not college material. Maybe she should follow the career of her older sister and become a secretary.”

Telling that story recently at the [Hunter College](#) commencement in Manhattan, Ms. Solis roared into the microphone that she, the daughter of immigrants, did become a secretary — the nation’s labor secretary. The crowd thundered with applause.

After surmounting many obstacles, Ms. Solis, a former four-term congresswoman, has become the first Hispanic woman to serve as a cabinet member. The third of seven children, she grew up in a modest home near a giant landfill just east of Los Angeles. Her mother worked in a toy factory, her father in a battery recycling plant, where he contracted lead poisoning.

Like [President Obama](#) and Judge [Sonia Sotomayor](#), whose confirmation to the [Supreme Court](#) would make her the first Hispanic justice, Ms. Solis, 51, pulled herself up through her own drive and intelligence. Now, she is hoping to use those qualities to reinvigorate the Labor Department, which she said became a neglected, atrophied, often pro-business backwater under President [George W. Bush](#).

She has promised a vigorous campaign to combat workplace violations, after government auditors found that the Bush Labor Department sometimes did not follow up on complaints of minimum wage, overtime and [child labor](#) violations. She said she planned to hire 250 more investigators and conduct a nationwide outreach program so that workers knew their rights and employers knew their obligations.

“There are so many people I knew when I was growing up who were not even paid the minimum wage,” Ms. Solis said. “People wouldn’t know where to go to lodge a complaint. And if you didn’t speak good English, forget it.”

Her goal of restoring morale and efficiency to the 17,000-employee department would not be easy, she said, partly because so many dedicated people had quit in recent years. When she spoke at a church in Miami in March, she pledged to increase workplace enforcement and used a much-applauded line: “There’s a new sheriff in town.” The next day, John Sweeney, the president of the [A.F.L.-C.I.O.](#), gave her a plastic badge that read “sheriff.”

But such enthusiastic support is far from universal, particularly among Republicans.

“She is anti-business and extremely pro-labor,” said Ray Haynes, a Republican former state senator in California who often clashed with Ms. Solis when she was a lawmaker in Sacramento. “From my experience with Hilda, she has always been doctrinaire. Hilda does not hear the other side of the story.”

Ms. Solis said she planned to make the Labor Department a major player in fixing the pension system and creating green jobs. And with unemployment climbing above 14.5 million, she has vowed to strengthen job-training programs.

When Mr. Obama offered her a cabinet post, she recalled, “he said if I wanted to work for him, you’re going to be the voice for working families and organized labor.”

For her that seems to run in the family. At the dinner table, she said, her father, an immigrant from Mexico, used to hold forth about factory conditions and how he, a Teamster shop steward, pushed to improve them.

“My father spoke to management and fought for the workers’ health and safety,” she said. “That is something I bring to the Department of Labor. Those values my father shared with me.”

Her mother, an immigrant from Nicaragua who often stood 10 hours a day at the toy factory, was so outspoken about working conditions that she would have been fired if the union had not protected her, Ms. Solis said.

Following her parents’ example, Ms. Solis has become a fighter — for immigrants, workers, minorities and women. “I’ve always been about seeking social justice and combating discrimination and racism,” she said. “I always wanted to stand up and fight for the underdog.”

Labor leaders said they hoped Ms. Solis would push to enact their No. 1 objective, legislation that would make it easier to unionize. At the time she was nominated to be labor secretary, Ms. Solis was the only member of Congress serving on the board of a pro-union group, American Rights at Work, a move that some supporters said caused Republicans to delay her confirmation.

With the Obama administration focused on fighting the [recession](#) and overhauling the health care system, she, like the president, has at least for now left it to Democratic senators to try to muster the 60 votes needed to overcome a [filibuster](#) on the unionization bill.

Ms. Solis majored in political science at [California State Polytechnic University, Pomona](#), and then obtained a master's degree in public administration at the [University of Southern California](#). While in graduate school, she interned at the White House under [Jimmy Carter](#) and soon landed a job with the [Office of Management and Budget](#).

Returning to California, she was hired to run a state program that helped poor students in the San Gabriel Valley go to college. Friends urged her to run for office, and at age 28, she was elected to the board of [Rio Hondo Community College](#).

In 1992, she won a seat in the California State Assembly and two years later she was elected to the State Senate, becoming California's first Latina state senator.

Remembering her malodorous hometown, La Puente, where there is a federal [Superfund](#) site and eight landfills, she sponsored a landmark environmental bill, which required the State [Environmental Protection Agency](#) to adopt regulations ensuring fair treatment of people of all races and incomes with respect to environmental laws.

Impressed by the legislation, the [John F. Kennedy](#) Library Foundation awarded her the Profile in Courage Award in 2000; she was the first woman to win it.

"This legislation was groundbreaking," [Caroline Kennedy](#) said in a telephone interview. "The bill didn't succeed the first time, but she came back and worked with the business community, compromised, and ultimately succeeded."

That same year, Ms. Solis challenged a nine-term congressman, Matthew Martinez, in the Democratic primary, angering many Hispanic leaders. Even though Mr. Martinez had a generally liberal voting record, she accused him of being out of touch with his constituency.

Unhappy about Mr. Martinez's free-trade voting record, the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor endorsed her, with its president calling her a "warrior for working families." She won the primary 62 percent to 29 percent and ran unopposed that November.

One of her mentors, Dolores Huerta, a founder of the United Farm Workers, said she was mystified by one thing about Ms. Solis. “I often went to Washington, and I always wondered why Hilda never said, ‘Stay at my place,’ ” Ms. Huerta said. “One night we had dinner, and she had to stop at her apartment to pick up something. Her apartment was tiny. There was barely enough room for a bed. I thought, ‘This is how a nun lives.’ ”

Ms. Solis is married; her husband, Sam Sayyad, runs an auto repair business outside Los Angeles.

At the Hunter commencement, Ms. Solis concluded by returning to her own story.

“People always say that women, people of color, Latinas, they’re not ready to go to college, they’re not ready to be in those big positions,” she said. “There are probably a dozen of you in this hall who are future Sonia Sotomayors, and there are probably two dozen future Hilda Solises. You have to have the ganas — the desire — to do it.”

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