



**Remarks by Hilda Solis
Latino Leaders Luncheon Series
Eagle Leadership Award**

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Hilda Solis: *Buenas tardes a todos* and good afternoon to all of you. I want to recognize a fellow colleague also who's been introduced already, Congressman Ruben Hinojosa, from Texas, thank you for honoring us by being here this afternoon. I'd like to also thank city council member from Los Angeles, Tony Cardenas for being here. Thank you. And to State Senator Alex Padilla, thank you so much for that lovely introduction and thank you for being here and being a friend and supporter from our hometown, Los Angeles in California, our home. And thank you for reciting those words that bring tears to my eyes. Every time I hear, Senator Kennedy, his voice, his wisdom, thank you for that. That's very nice, very touching.

And, of course, former Congressman Bob Garcia, *muchisimas gracias* for being here, it's good to see you. And to Mickey Ibarra, thank you for hosting us here and having this wonderful gathering, it's nice to see so many friends that I have not had an opportunity to see in some time. And it's not without

wanting to see you, it's because we've been really busy at the Department of Labor. But I want to commend you on the leadership of this organization and the people that you bring here today, and especially all the corporate sponsors, who make this event what it is. It's so important and so refreshing to hear the new U.S. Chamber of Commerce president, talk so eloquently about your passion for the Latino community. I hope to engage with you and work with you with the Department of Labor, because the Department of Labor stands to work alongside with our Hispanic businesses to improve the quality of life for our economic well-being, but also for the many workers that we represent throughout this country. So congratulations on your new position there.

As was said earlier, I am proud to be a Latina. Yes, it's very evident, I wear it. But I also come from a small town, from humble beginnings, from a small community town known as La Puente and in Spanish, that's the bridge. Maybe in some ways, it's very important to talk about that, because La Puente brought me a long way. It brought me to a place like this here in Washington, D.C. Someone who probably growing up in her life, did not think that she would be coming back to Washington D.C., was said earlier that I worked here in the Carter Administration. That was well over 20 some years ago. I was an intern here working on my master's program through USC, and

found my way into an office that was then represented by Esteban Torres who was the representative special assistant to President Carter. I came in as a writer, and I was working on my graduate degree. So that was my first real, I think, big change in my life, leaving a small town community like La Puente where maybe less than five people that I could count on my hand even went to college.

You see, folks, some of us from those communities that we represent, still don't have that opportunity. Some of our youth, and maybe some of the youth in this room, may have experienced this. But oftentimes, there are people who don't see us in these roles, that think that we can achieve, that we can actually be successful and become more than just secretaries, office workers, because that's exactly what happened to me when I was growing up. At my high school, many of the students were tracked, as we say, into vocational programs, the military, and if you were a young woman, well, if you got married, you were lucky. Or if you went on to become a secretary or a government worker as a clerk. That's where most of the counseling staff saw this population, which was at that time, about 85 percent Latino. Not knowing any better, because I had no one else, no other siblings in my household who went to college, I kind of believed what these counselors were telling me until I ran into someone else who actually told me, Hilda,

you can actually be something more than that. And because you care so much about your community, why don't you think about channeling that energy in a positive way, by getting an education and coming back and helping to rid your communities of these injustices that you see, that you feel, that you grew up with? And I thought to myself, wow, that's a big calling, to be able to, to try to do something like that.

Very enormous and very intimidating for a young Latina whose parents traditionally would say you can't leave the home. You can't go to college and live in the dorm. And if you do, we've got to go check it out. We got to make sure you're telling us the truth, and convincing them about the whole culture of education. It was a long time in coming. But I'm happy I went through that experience because as a result, and I come from a family of seven, I was the third child, there's five girls and two boys, after I went to college, thank goodness, my younger siblings decided to do the same thing, at least the majority of them did. I'm happy to report that it does matter that someone in the family in our culture, talk about educational opportunities.

It does matter that someone talk about mentoring, networking, and bringing in other resources to talk about how we can improve our communities. The way we do it is by channeling that information to our siblings, and bringing them in contact

with other networks. I'm happy to say that in my family, I have a sister who's a PhD in public health, a graduate of UCLA. And I have two younger sisters who are engineers, who are 10 years my junior, both graduated from UCLA. One is a Petro chemical engineer. The other one is a communications IT engineer. So, the myth about Latinas not being able to do it or hang in is just not true.

It's no secret that I've been fighting for most of my public life to try to correct some of the wrongs that I personally saw in our society, whether it dealt with advocating on behalf of undocumented students. This isn't in my notes, but I'm going to mention it. Because I'm brought to think about what happened after I left the State Assembly and the State Senate. When I was elected in back in 1992, in 1993, I had a group of friends that I'd worked with in higher education. I worked with them before I was elected to try to help undocumented students receive access and placement in the universities and colleges around California. There was a case that MALDEF litigated the *Leticia A* decision. And I carried the first bill in the assembly during that time, when there were very few Latinos and the Speaker of the House at that time was Willie Brown. He looked at me and he said, you got to be crazy girl, you think you're going to get a bill right now? This is pre-1994, before 187 in California.

And you know, little did I know being naive and thinking, oh, no, we've got to put this issue out there. There are a lot of students who deserve to be able to be admitted to college, these are our best and brightest. Lo and behold, I found out through three attempts, all of the attempts failed. I couldn't even get 16 votes from our Democratic caucus. It taught me a tremendous lesson at that time. But the fight went on and later another assemblyman came years later, Marco Fireball worked on that bill. I know members here know very well how long and how hard it took just to get that bill through in the California legislature. So I'm just recalling how long it takes sometimes for our progress to be made, and how we seed them. How all of us here have a responsibility to take risks, and to remember who brought us to the table, people who helped to improve our lot in life by allowing us to be able to have the fruits of being in these positions that we have now. But being able to be legitimately taken seriously by corporate America, and by our government, and you do it through education.

So that's one of my basic goals and premises of where I am and how I got to where I am today. But I think even more than that is that so much has happened in the last 20 years since I worked here as a student. And there are a lot of challenges. I'm coming in at a time when people ask me, "Hilda, why are you taking this position as labor secretary when you're in the worst

recession that this country has seen in 30 years," 30 years. And I say to myself, you know, I didn't take it on the premise that we were in trouble. I knew we were in trouble. I served for eight years in the House of Representatives. And many of the initiatives that I'm able to now put forward are no longer blocked. We get funding for youth programs. We get funding for enforcement, for labor protections. We get funding for able to put people into new draw job training opportunities that they have not received in the last decade. So these are the things that many of us in this room and you know who you are. We worked very hard to try to seek this kind of support.

Finally, we have an administration that understands that, that is putting people, that is putting workers first. To me that is the underlying priority that brings us all together here as Latinos. We must not forget our community. We must not forget who brought us to the table. We must not forget the fight that we face every single day. That's whether you see an increasing unemployment figure amongst our population, which is well above 13 percent and amongst our youth, 25 percent. And God knows, in some communities, in small towns in Texas, Tennessee, it's upwards of 30 and 40 percent. It isn't just Latinos. It's African Americans, and its poor whites. And the literacy rate amongst our workforce continues to lag behind.

Many of the people who are recently unemployed and dislocated, dislocated workers, that big number that you see, that doesn't really capture who the unemployed are. We're talking about 15 million people who are unemployed. A good number, maybe well, over half, have no high school education. If you start to look in the weeds and see who those folks are in our community, many of them have not been able to achieve access to higher education, or beyond high school. So our work is still much needed. And our efforts have to be even stronger and more forceful. We don't have time; the clock is ticking. And that's the way I see my job.

We have so many things on our plate. I'm also not just interested by helping to take care of workers' rights and protections and making sure. I'm not sure if everyone realizes this, but we're the second largest enforcement agency in the federal government, Department of Labor. Hello. People didn't know that. And you know why, because the previous administration did not take this seriously and they did not stand up for a lot of the people who were in this room and who are not in this room. That has changed. Maybe it sounds funny; some people have dubbed me the new sheriff in town. Well, I don't know about that. But I will tell you that I take my job very seriously. We're going to do everything we can, by moving forward to see that we protect workers in the workplace. We

have a very ambitious program to hire well over 670 investigative personnel, whether it's in wage an hour, or OSHA, or EPSA, and all our other agencies where we require assistance.

It doesn't mean that we're going to go knocking on your door banging it down. It means what we want to say. We want to work with you. We want to make sure that corporations know that. Yes, we're going to be there. We want to work with you. But we want to make sure that everybody abides by the rules, because when you don't abide by the rules, then you hurt American workers, and you hurt especially the most vulnerable populations. And that is our population, the Latino population.

I don't have to tell you what the statistics are in terms of fatalities in construction, but they're abysmal. We have more deaths in Texas, in construction amongst Latino workers. In other parts of our country, it's underreported. Injuries, death, illnesses, harassment, termination, those things were underreported for a decade. Well, now we're hoping with the help of other groups like yours, that are here, we can work to change that. So we can turn that statistic around and be proud of our Hispanic community workforce and businesses. We can be partners in this venture and I hope that we can continue to do that.

I want to tell you that for the last - it's been about a good seven months now - I spent most of my time and I haven't

been able to really come out and see everyone as I would normally like to. Because I've been around the country and I have been visiting well over 35 different cities, traveled over 35,000 miles back and forth. I thought when I gave up my pin to be a member of the House that I would be able to go home more and maybe reduce my travel. Well, nothing could be further than the truth. I am actually traveling more and more and more. I am going out to places that I have never seen with so much need. Yet inspiration because there's a lot of people out there that are hurting, that are looking to this administration, that are looking to a few good leaders that can make something happen for them.

I feel very, very proud when I go out on an assembly line and I'm looking at workers who are getting retrained, who just got laid off from being an auto worker who are now in a training program that's offered by a union apprenticeship program the IBEW programs that are now retooling these folks to become solar panel installers, and learning a whole new Smart Grid electricity system that will reduce our dependency on foreign oil. When I see people of color engaging in these new types of job opportunities, and women - underscore women - we are looking for women to get into these non-traditional fields. That's something that the Department of Labor will put their teeth behind. I am saying that we have to all participate. We all

have to take responsibility for helping to move our economy in a positive direction. So that the next time when I come here, next year when Mickey Ibarra has his next luncheon, it will be in March, that we can see that we're adding jobs to this economy. I feel very positive about the types of systematic changes that this president has made to our economy, financial wise, by allowing for credit to be made available to small businesses, allowing for new incentives through the Department of Energy to re-energize and retool our manufacturing base, whether it's creating new electric vehicles, hybrid vehicles, or lithium batteries, targeting our efforts in Task Force mode to look at the automobile industry, that is under my jurisdiction. And we are trying to put together what we call a kind of a BRAC team, Department of Defense uses this terminology, a strike force that will go into our different communities and begin to look, piece by piece how we can help put back these communities together. They may not be automobile industry regions any longer, they may be retooled to do something entirely different. That's what the Department of Labor would like to do, in coordination with all the other cabinet members of this administration. I feel very strongly about the progress that I've seen and that we're making.

I want to tell you that so many good people have influenced my life. Bobby Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., Dolores

Huerta, who was honored here before by this organization, Ted Kennedy, Cesar Chavez, but more importantly, I have to give thanks to my parents, because they're really the ones that helped to set me straight, that keep me honest, when I go home, they still say, [speaks in Spanish]. So you're not you may think you're the cabinet secretary, but you're still our daughter. So believe me, that keeps us very humble.

But I just want to say what a proud moment it is to be serving in the capacity to be able to leverage our support our resources, to put people back to work. I had the opportunity just yesterday to give out \$55 million, which is a small amount, a small amount of money in green job training. Programs aimed at youth, at dislocated workers. And the places that we call, we're in Tejas, we're in San Antonio, they were in Phoenix, they were in New York, and they were in California in East Los Angeles, grants going everywhere. And guess what, the criteria has changed as to who receives that money. And you know why, because somebody considered as an administrator and asked for different guideline language and panelists to help us decide where the money goes.

So it's not - how could I say - relying on what was done 10 years ago, it's changing the whole design and it's about moving rapidly. I really want to thank my staff at DOL, who were here and the ones that are working back at the office and in the

regions, because they have made this change possible, because they see a new style of leadership, and they see a new investment in them. And they are helping to move our agenda. So I am delighted to be able to be a part of that. We're going to be rolling out another \$220 million of our \$750 million that will go to healthcare careers. We are encouraged to see more of our young people getting involved, or people who want to get retrained into these and IT programs. So we want to see that happen.

I see one of my good friends here, Senator Bob Menendez, thank you for coming. I thank him, and I thank the members, the Democratic members and the few brave Republicans that voted for the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. Because without that I would not have the ability to pass out these grants that we're making available to retool America and to retool the Latino workforce. So thank God, and I thank our president for giving me the opportunity to oversee this Cabinet Office that employs well over 15,000 people. I am proud that while I've only been there a short time, I want to read off the names of people who do serve with me. Kathy Martinez, she's an assistant secretary for the Office of Disability and Employment Policy. She is now serving as my assistant secretary. Junior Ortiz is my deputy assistant for Secretary of Veterans and Employment Training Services. Jaime Zapata is Deputy Assistant Secretary

of the Office of Public Affairs. Katherine Archuleta who you met earlier is my chief of staff. Dr. Gabriela Lima is director of the Office of Public Engagement. And my new nominee is Director for the women's Bureau is Sarah Manzano Diaz.

And amongst that, over 40 percent of my staff in the Department of Labor, in my top administrative unit is Latino and Latinas. So nobody's going to tell me that we're going to stop now. We're going to keep moving. I hope that all of you will be encouraged to continue to support the policies of this administration, that you will help us move along the reform we need to see in healthcare, because so many Latinos are not able to access healthcare, and especially our children, 33 percent of our children remain uninsured under the age of six. That is a disappointment and we have to make that change. So thank you for this. Mickey, thank you for everything and for all of you being here, it's been a real pleasure to see a lot of you here. And I hope that you will be encouraged also, to take note that when we talk about increasing our representation, it isn't just in one segment of our society, but we also want a few good men and women to come and work for me. So thank you.