



Latino Leaders Speak

Personal Stories of
Struggle and Triumph

Edited by
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Hilda L. Solis

U.S. Secretary of Labor

November 20, 2009

Secretary Hilda L. Solis was confirmed as Secretary of Labor on February 24, 2009, becoming the first Latina to serve in a U.S. president's cabinet. Prior to confirmation as Secretary of Labor, Secretary Solis represented the 32nd Congressional District in California, a position she held from 2001 to 2009. In Congress, Solis' priorities included expanding access to affordable health care, protecting the environment and improving the lives of working families. A recognized leader on clean energy jobs, she authored the Green Jobs Act that provided funding for "green" collar job training for veterans, displaced workers, at-risk youth and individuals in families under 200 percent of the federal poverty line.

Solis experienced what many first-generation Latinas experience in this country—living with a foot in two cultures. On the one hand, there was the expectation that a girl who finished high school was expected to get married and not go to college. If she was lucky, she could study to be a secretary, but she had to live at the home while she studied and not move to a dorm. Lucky for Solis, she felt the calling to pursue an education and used that education to inspire not only her siblings, but helped many underserved communities pursue educational and employment opportunities.

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 known as La Puente. In Spanish, that means "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 Washington, D.C. I was someone who probably growing up did not think that she would be coming back to Washington, D.C.

I worked here in the Carter administration well over twenty years ago. I was an intern working on my master's program through the University of Southern California and found my way into an office that was then represented by Esteban Torres, the representative special assistant to President Carter. I came in as a writer. That was the first real big change in my life: leaving a small-town community like La Puente, where maybe less than five people even went to college.

Some of the folks from those communities that we represent still don't have that opportunity. Some of our youth may have experienced this. But oftentimes, there are people who don't see us in these roles, don't think that we can achieve, that we can actually be successful and become more than just secretaries or office workers.

At my high school, many of the students were "tracked," as we say into vocational programs, to the military. If you were a young woman, well, if you got married you were lucky, or you went on to become a secretary or a government worker as a clerk. That's what most of the counseling staff predicted for 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 believed what these counselors were telling me, until I ran into someone 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 get-

ting an education and coming back and helping to rid your community of these injustices that you see, that you grew up with?"

I thought to myself, "Wow, that's a big calling, to be able to try to do something like that." It was very enormous and very intimidating for a young Latina whose parents traditionally would say, "You can't leave 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've got to make sure you're telling us the truth." I had to convince them about the whole culture of education. It was a long time coming, but I'm happy I went through that experience because after I went to college, thank goodness, the majority of my five younger siblings decided to do the same thing.

I'm happy to report that it does matter that someone in the family or in our culture talks about educational opportunities. It does matter that someone talks about mentoring, networking and bringing in other resources, and talks 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 has a PhD in Public Health from UCLA, and I have two younger sisters who are ten years my junior, who graduated from UCLA: one is a petrochemical engineer and the other one is a communications IT engineer.

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. When I was elected back in 1992, I had a group of friends whom I had worked with in higher education. I had worked with them before I was elected to try to help undocumented students receive access and placement in the universities and colleges around California. 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've got to be crazy, girl. You think you're going to get a bill right now?"

This was pre-1994, before Proposition 187 in California. I knew very little, being naïve and thinking, “Oh no, we’ve got to put this issue out there. There’re a lot of students who deserve to be able to be admitted to college. These are our best and brightest.” Well, lo and behold, I made three attempts; all three attempts failed. I couldn’t even get sixteen votes from our Democratic Caucus. It taught me a tough lesson at that time.

But the fight went on. Assemblyman Marco Firebaugh and I later worked long and hard on that bill to get it through in the California legislature. I’m just recalling how long it takes sometimes for our progress to be made and how we seed progress, how all of us here have a responsibility to take risks and to remember who brought us to the table. They were people who helped to improve our lot in life by allowing us have these positions in which we are legitimately taken seriously by corporate America and by our government. And you do it through education.

So much has happened in the last twenty 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?” 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 to be able to put people into new job training opportunities that they have not received in the last decade. Finally, we have an administration that puts workers first. Now, 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. And that’s whether or not you see an increasing unemployment figure for our population, which is well above 13 percent, and for our youth, 25 percent.

In some communities, in small towns in Texas and Tennessee, it's upwards of 30 and 40 percent. And it isn't just Latinos; it's African Americans and poor whites. The literacy rate of our workforce continues to lag behind. We're talking about fifteen 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 go beyond high school.

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 entrusted with helping to take care of workers' rights and protections. I'm not sure if everyone realizes this, but we are the second largest enforcement agency in the federal government: The Department of Labor. People don'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 are in this room and who are not in this room. Now, that has changed.

Maybe it sounds funny—some people have dubbed me “the new sheriff in town”—but I will tell you that I take my job very seriously. We're going to do everything we can in moving forward to see that we protect workers in the workplace. We have a very ambitious program to hire well more than 670 investigative personnel, whether it's in the Wage and Hour Division, the Occupation Safety and Health Administration, the Employment Benefits Security Administration and all our other agencies that require assistance. But it doesn't mean that we're going to go knocking on your door, banging it down. It means 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 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 espe-

cially 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: they're abysmal. We have the most deaths in Texas in construction with Latino workers. In other parts of our country, it's under-reporting of injuries, death, illnesses, harassment, termination—those things have been under-reported for a decade. Now we're hoping, with the help of other groups like yours that are here, that we can work to 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.

For the last seven months now, I have been visiting more than 35 cities; I've traveled more than 35,000 miles. 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 from the truth. I am actually traveling more and more and more, and I am going out to places that I have never seen with so much need and yet inspiration. Because there are a lot of people out there that are hurting, that are looking to this administration, that are looking to a few good leaders who can make something happen for them.

I feel very, very proud when I go out on an assembly line and look at workers who are getting retrained, who just got laid off from being an autoworker who are now in a training program that's offered by a union apprenticeship program, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers programs. They are now re-tooling 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 into.

I am saying that we all have to participate, that we all have to take responsibility for helping to move our economy in a positive direction, so 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 in the Department of Energy to re-energize and re-tool our manufacturing base, whether it's creating new electric vehicles, hybrid vehicles or lithium batteries, or targeting our efforts in taskforce mode to look at the automobile industry—that is under my jurisdiction.

We are trying to put together a BRAC team, a strike force that will go into our different communities and begin piece by piece to see how we can help put these communities back together. It may not be the automobile industry regions any longer. It may be to re-tool 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.

So many good people have influenced my life: Bobby Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., Dolores Huerta, Ted Kennedy and César Chávez. More importantly, I have to give thanks to my parents because they're really the ones who helped set me straight, who keep me honest. When I go home, they still say, "You may think you're the cabinet secretary, but you're still our daughter." So, believe me, that keeps me very humble.

I just want to say what a proud moment it is to be serving in this 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 of money, in green job training, programs aimed at youth, at dislocated workers. The places that we called were in *Tejas*, San Antonio, Phoenix, New York, East Los Angeles—we had grants going everywhere. The criteria have changed as to who receives that money, because somebody asked for an administrator, different guideline lan-

guage and panelists to help us decide where the money goes. It's not relying on what was done ten years ago. It's changing the whole design and it's about moving rapidly.

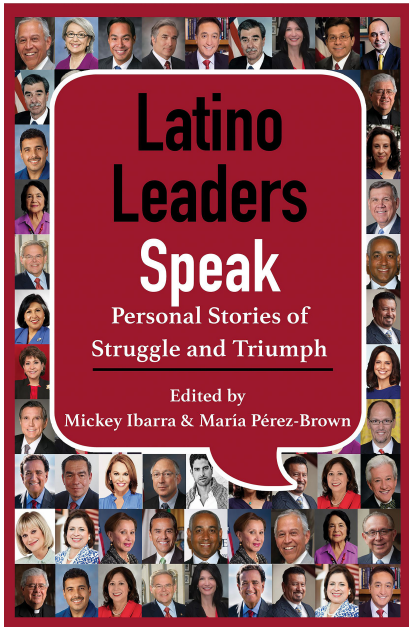
We're going to be rolling out another \$220 million of our \$750 million that will go to healthcare careers. We are encouraged to see more of our young people getting retrained in these and IT programs. We want to see that happen.

I thank Senator Bob Menéndez, the members of the congressional Democrats and the few brave Republicans who voted for the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, because without that, I would not have the ability to pass out these grants that we are making available to re-tool America and to re-tool the Latino workforce.

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Personal Stories of Struggle and Triumph

Edited by Mickey Ibarra and María Pérez-Brown



Originally presented at the Latino Leaders Luncheon Series in Washington, DC, and other major cities, the personal stories included in this book are all by successful Latinos involved in a variety of occupations, from politics and sports to education and activism. Their words will inspire readers of all ages to follow their dreams and help those less fortunate.

“The resonant message adheres to the quintessentially American formula of hard work and persistence in the land of opportunity.”
— *Booklist*

“‘Our stories are powerful and need to be told.’ That simple yet seminal statement in *Latino Leaders Speak* is precisely what makes this book required reading.”

— Patricia Guadalupe,
Contributing Writer, *NBC Latino*
Washington Editor, *Latino Magazine*

Contributors include former Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa; former general manager of the New York Mets Omar Minaya; Chancellor of the University of Texas System Dr. Francisco G. Cigarroa; former U.S. Attorney General Alberto R. Gonzales; news anchor Maria Elena Salina; and many others.

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