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Rep. George Miller (D-Calif.) Statement at the Hearing on “Policies and Priorities of the Department of Labor”

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Below are the prepared remarks of U.S. Rep. George Miller (D-Calif.), the ranking member of the House Committee on Education and the Workforce for the hearing on “Policies and Priorities of the Department of Labor.”

Good morning. I would like to welcome back our former colleague Secretary of Labor Hilda Solis to the committee.

Secretary Solis appeared a year ago to discuss strengthening the economy and improving the lives of American workers. We agreed that our most important priority was to get America back to work. Jobs that pay fair wages. Jobs that are safe. Madame Secretary, you have made great progress in these areas.

In particular, I applaud your efforts to make our nation’s workforce programs more responsive to local economic conditions so that workers can be trained and find new jobs.

And, when Americans go to work, they should be paid fairly and according to the law. On this front, the department has played a critical role having secured \$313 million in unpaid wages for workers.

I am also pleased that the department has moved quickly to respond to the Upper Big Branch mine explosion and other workplace tragedies. Workers are safer on the job and unscrupulous employers are held more accountable for putting their employees in danger.

However, all of this progress is threatened. The House is now debating a Republican spending bill that will reverse this course. Too many Americans are still struggling with the fallout of the worst financial crisis in more than a half a century. That’s why job creation and repairing our economy must remain at the top of our agenda.

Central to this mission are the millions of workers and local businesses that utilize Workforce Investment Act employment and training services each year. Unfortunately, the Republican spending bill would effectively eliminate these vital services all across the country.

In fact, starting in April, if these cuts pass, every one of the 3,000 One-Stop career centers will begin to close. Millions of Americans looking for training, looking for jobs, or inquiring about

benefits would be locked out. Local workforce boards made up of businesses, community colleges and others leaders will be unable to respond to local employment conditions.

In light of the chairman's previous statements in support for this important program, I hope he would agree that totally eviscerating WIA is short-sighted and unwise.

Finally, when Americans go to work, their jobs should be safe. Unfortunately, the Republican spending bill would slash worker health and safety.

Last April, 29 coal miners never returned home to their families after their shift deep in a West Virginia mountain.

In the wake of this tragedy, this committee learned of the lengths that some mine owners like Massey Energy would go to avoid improving chronic safety problems. Once we learned the extent of this gaming of the system, we ensured that the Department of Labor has sufficient resources to stop them.

The spending plan on the floor today would once again allow mine owners to game the system and put miners' lives at risk.

This tragedy and other workplace disasters are a reminder that the action or inaction of Congress or the regulatory agencies can directly affect the lives and health of our citizens. That's why the Republican plan to slash the Occupational Safety and Health Administration is so chilling.

Madame Secretary, OSHA will have very few options other than making significant cuts to worker health and safety. There would be thousands fewer workplace hazard inspections. OSHA would be cut to 1974 staffing levels, even though there are 65 percent more private sector workers today as there were in 1974. There will not be enough investigators to conduct the fatality and accident investigations needed. And, funding for OSHA's website would even be zeroed out.

Workers are not cogs in the wheel. They are fathers, mothers, sons, and daughters. They deserve basic health and safety protections.

We've seen what happens when you rely on self-certification, voluntary compliance and inadequate protections. Upper Big Branch happens. Deepwater Horizon happens. Imperial Sugar happens.

By statute, the Department of Labor is tasked to "foster, promote, and develop the welfare of the wage earners of the United States, to improve their working conditions, and to advance their opportunities for profitable employment." For too long, that mission was forgotten.

But you have made progress in restoring that mission in the last two years. Unfortunately, the Republican spending bill will turn this progress on its head.

No one is in favor of wasteful spending or outdated government regulations that don't work. Instead of indentifying real government waste – like subsidies for big oil or tax cuts to billionaires – House Republicans have decided to cut on the backs of working people and students.

Our workers' safety and our nation's economic competitiveness can ill afford these unwise cuts.

I yield back.

<http://democrats.edworkforce.house.gov>