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Rep. George Miller (D-CA) Opening Statement for the Hearing with Secretary Solis

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Below are the prepared remarks of U.S. Rep. George Miller (D-CA), the ranking member of the House Committee on Education and the Workforce.

Today I am pleased to announce that Congresswoman Marcia Fudge from Ohio's 11th district will be filling the minority's vacancy on the committee. She will be sitting on the Early Childhood, Elementary and Secondary Education subcommittee, as well as the Workforce Protections subcommittee.

Ms. Fudge first joined the committee in 2009 and immediately made her mark as a strong voice on behalf of her constituents. While the committee has lost a strong voice for justice and working people in Congressman Donald Payne, we welcome Marcia's dedication to rebuilding our nation's middle class and reigniting the American Dream.

And welcome back to our former colleague.

Secretary Solis joins us at a turning point for our nation's workers and families. The 2008 Global Financial Crisis threw our economy into a tailspin. The resulting recession was long and deep. In January 2009 alone, the month that President Obama took office, the economy lost 839,000 jobs.

When Secretary Solis first appeared before the Education and Labor Committee two years ago, the unemployment rate stood at 10.6 percent. More than 8 million workers had been laid off and millions more were rightfully concerned that they could be next. This country was going through the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression.

Fortunately, things have begun turning around.

While much work remains to be done, the economy is beginning to heal, and we are in a much better place today than when Secretary Solis first joined us in February of 2010.

But this wasn't a matter of luck. The crisis was turned around in large part because of the actions taken by the Obama administration and the previous Congress. Economists from across the ideological spectrum agree: Bold action laid the groundwork for the economic recovery.

By working together for the good of the economy, we stopped the hemorrhaging and laid the tracks for a return to economic growth.

The facts are indisputable. Today, the unemployment rate has dropped to 8.3 percent. There have been 24 straight months of private-sector job growth. 3.9 million new jobs have been created.

In fact, year-over-year private sector job growth is at its fastest rate since early 2006, back when the housing bubble was driving the economy. Over the last two years, the economy added 429,000 manufacturing jobs after years of sector decline. The American automobile industry has been rescued, along with millions of good middle class jobs.

The small business optimism index has seen six consecutive months of gains, as confidence in the recovery builds.

And the markets are up nearly 27 percent since Secretary Solis' first appearance. While we are headed in the right direction, more work remains to be done if we want to fully rebuild our middle class economy and reignite the American Dream.

And Secretary Solis has been at the forefront of these efforts.

By statute, the mission of the Department of Labor is 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.”

This mission expresses important American values. Not only do we value hard work and the entrepreneurial spirit, our nation also values a job that is safe. We value careers that treat workers fairly and compensate them according to the law.

Upholding these values creates more jobs and more business opportunities.

Another piece to the agency's mission is to advance opportunities for profitable employment.

And central to this are the millions of workers and local businesses who utilize the Workforce Investment Act employment and training services each year. A modern workforce investment system must rise to meet the needs of the country's labor market and create opportunities for Americans to step into the middle class.

Now is not the time gut its mission like some are proposing.

But the fact remains that the current system needs improvement. It needs to better align education and training programs so that workers have the skills for in-demand careers. It does no good to provide training for jobs that don't exist.

That's why Congressman Tierney, Congressman Hinojosa and I introduced a bill yesterday to modernize workforce investment programs. It will do this by encouraging innovative programs that connect workers with in-demand industries, streamlining access to important services and increasing accountability for these services.

WIA must be doing more to encourage private sector partnerships that connect employers, labor unions, community colleges, workforce boards and local governments to meet local workforce needs.

Frankly, this is something this committee could be working together on right now. It would modernize and introduce real accountability to a system in desperate need of it. In the process, it will help to give millions of Americans the opportunity to climb into the middle class.

A bipartisan panel of governors delivered that exact message when they testified before the committee earlier in the year. They asked us to put aside those issues that divide us and work together where we could find consensus, like reforming the Workforce Investment Act.

It is still my hope that we heed their message. Especially during times of crisis, Congress should be working together for the benefit of all Americans.

The country deserves a Congress that solves problems. They cannot afford a Congress that ignores the challenges working families are facing, let alone a Congress that actively stands in the way of economic recovery.

There are still more than 5 million Americans out of work because of the Wall Street financial scandals.

Many millions more are underemployed or who have given up returning to work all together.

Congress should be working with the administration to move the country forward, considering proposals like those in the American Jobs Act, and not standing in the way of getting America back to work.

Secretary Solis, thank you again for appearing before the Committee.

I look forward to your testimony and a lively discussion on how we can work together to reignite the American Dream.

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