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EDITORIAL

The Labor Agenda

There is no doubt that President-elect Barack Obama has chosen a labor secretary who could be a transformative force in a long-neglected arena. The question is whether he will let her.

Hilda Solis, a United States representative from Southern California, is the daughter of immigrant parents with union jobs. She has been an unfailing advocate of workers' rights during eight years in Congress and before that, in California politics.

Ms. Solis has been a leader on traditional workplace issues, like a higher minimum wage and an enhanced right to form unions. She also has helped to expand the labor agenda by sponsoring legislation to create jobs in green technology, and in her support for community health workers and immigration reform.

Her record in Congress dovetails with the mission of the Labor Department, to protect and further the rights and opportunities of working people. It also dovetails with many of the promises Mr. Obama made during the campaign, both in its specifics and in its focus on the needs of America's working families.

The main issue is whether the Obama administration will assert a forceful labor agenda in the face of certain protests from business that now — during a recession — is not the time to move forward.

The first and biggest test of Mr. Obama's commitment to labor, and to Ms. Solis, will be his decision on whether or not to push the Employee Free Choice

Act in 2009. Corporate America is determined to derail the bill, which would make it easier than it has been for workers to form unions by requiring that employers recognize a union if a majority of employees at a workplace sign cards indicating they wish to organize.

Ms. Solis voted for the bill when it passed the House in 2007. Senate Republicans prevented the bill from coming to a vote that same year. Mr. Obama voted in favor of bringing the bill to the Senate floor and supported it during the campaign.

The measure is vital legislation and should not be postponed. Even modest increases in the share of the unionized labor force push wages upward, because nonunion workplaces must keep up with unionized ones that collectively bargain for increases. By giving employees a bigger say in compensation issues, unions also help to establish corporate norms, the absence of which has contributed to unjustifiable disparities between executive pay and rank-and-file pay.

The argument against unions — that they unduly burden employers with unreasonable demands — is one that corporate America makes in good times and bad, so the recession by itself is not an excuse to avoid pushing the bill next year. The real issue is whether enhanced unionizing would worsen the recession, and there is no evidence that it would.

There is a strong argument that the slack labor market of a recession actually makes unions all the more important. Without a united front, workers will have even less bargaining power in the recession than they had during the growth years of this decade, when they largely failed to get raises even as productivity and profits soared. If pay continues to lag, it will only prolong the downturn by inhibiting spending.

Another question clouding the labor agenda is whether Mr. Obama will give equal weight to worker concerns — from reforming health care to raising the minimum wage — while the financial crisis is still playing out. Most members of his economic team are veterans of the Clinton administration who tilt toward Wall Street. In the Clinton era, financial issues routinely trumped labor concerns. If Mr. Obama's campaign promises are to be kept, that

mindset cannot prevail again. Mr. Obama's creation of a task force on middle-class issues, to be led by Vice President-elect Joseph Biden and including Ms. Solis and other high-ranking officials, is an encouraging sign that labor issues will not be given short shrift.

There are many nonlegislative issues on the agenda for Ms. Solis. Safety standards must be updated: in the last eight years, the Labor Department has issued only one new safety rule of its own accord; it issued a few others only after being compelled by Congress or the courts. Overtime rules that were weakened in 2004 need to be restored. To enforce labor standards, the Labor Department will need more staff and more money, both of which have been cut deeply by President Bush.

Only the president can give the new labor secretary the clout she will need to do well at a job that has been done so badly for so long, at such great cost to the quality of Americans' lives.

