

Secretary of Labor Hilda L. Solis

Remarks for the Honorable Hilda L. Solis Migrant Workers Rights Signing Ceremony DOL Great Hall
Washington, D.C.

Monday, June 11, 2012

Buenos dias. It's my pleasure to welcome you all to the Department of Labor for this important event. I am so glad to be joined today by Ambassador Hernández Alcerro of Honduras, Ambassador Cuisia of the Philippines, Ambassador Forsyth of Peru and Ambassador Cely of Ecuador

I'm also pleased to have with us two important leaders here at the Department of Labor: Assistant Secretary David Michaels directs our worker safety efforts as the head of OSHA, and Assistant Administrator Libby Hendrix is here representing our Wage & Hour Division to ensure workers are paid what they're legally owed.

We've gathered today to strengthen our shared commitment to protect the labor rights of migrant workers in the United States. Workers from Honduras, the Philippines, Peru and Ecuador are an important part of the American labor force. They work in hard-to-fill occupations, and they pay taxes, rent and receive few government services. We're grateful for their contributions to our economy.

Muchisimas gracias por su apoyo. Lo agradecemos mucho.

I'm proud to lead an agency that will not allow anyone to be denied his or her rightful pay, especially when so many are working long, hard hours doing dangerous work. Unfortunately, migrant workers can be vulnerable to abuse. When they are made to work in unsafe conditions or are not paid the wages they're owed, it has a ripple effect across our whole economy. Labor law violations create downward pressures on the wages and working conditions of all workers.

Our motivation for signing these agreements is straightforward: If we allow a few unscrupulous employers to exploit and underpay their workers, it would send a message to other companies that it's OK for them to do the same in order to compete. If that happened, all workers would lose.

When we enforce our laws for all workers in this country, the companies that play by the rules get an advantage. When businesses are encouraged by our government to provide lawful wages and safe work conditions, everyone wins and we stay true to our values. So today, we take an important step to level the playing field.

At the Department of Labor, we're committed to ensuring all workers are safe on the job and fully and fairly compensated for their hard work. Since 2009, I've hired more than 300 new Wage & Hour investigators. This brings the total number to more than 1,000, and more than 600 of our investigators are bilingual.

Our worker safety agency is also working hard to reach out to workers in their native language. In 2010, OSHA held its first ever National Action Summit for Latino workers. Since that summit, we have started a dialogue with hundreds of organizations to protect vulnerable workers. We've translated our safety materials into Spanish, and we've hired bilingual inspectors to go to jobsites and talk to people in their native language about their safety concerns.

Language barriers should never be a reason for any worker to suffer a preventable injury or illness on the job. All workers in America have a legal right to safe, clean working conditions. And they have the right to get paid the full wages they are owed. This means no less than \$7.25 an hour — the federal minimum wage.

We understand that many migrant workers are afraid to report mistreatment because it can lead to more abuse or the loss of their job. That's why today's partnerships are so important. The beauty of this program is its simplicity. We're partnering with the institutions where they're most likely to go for help: their own country's consulates. We'll work with the different consulates to identify vulnerable workers and get them the education, information and training they need to protect themselves.

We'll also offer training to employers who utilize migrant workers, so they understand their legal obligations. The consulates will help spread the word about the Labor Department's toll-free hotlines, where workers can report safety and wage violations. These calls are free and confidential. Workers can call the hotline, day or night, and speak to advocates in their native language to report violations or safety concerns.

Today, we formalize new partnerships with the Embassies of Honduras, the Philippines, Peru and Ecuador. They will help us communicate with workers who we might not otherwise be able to reach. With these signings, we're proud that we'll now have 10 country partnerships in place. We have signed similar partnerships with Mexico and a number of Central American countries.

Now, we're broadening our reach across the globe by signing a memorandum of understanding with the Philippines.

The partnerships we've forged will save lives and livelihoods. Without them workplace hazards and abuses may stay hidden. These agreements already have helped so many people. Each has a unique story. Like a Mexican man who obtained a work visa and came to this country to provide for his family back home. He worked long hours every day as a landscaper with the hope of saving enough money for Christmas presents for his seven children and a down payment on a small piece of land for his family to live on. But on payday, his employer confiscated a significant portion of his wages.

As it turned out, this employer forced all of his Mexican employees to pay him kickbacks, or they would be fired and sent home. So we stepped in, we recovered every penny of those lost wages, and we put a stop to this illegal behavior. The man was totally amazed. He told our investigator: "I never thought that justice would be served for us: foreign workers."

I'm so proud we could help justice prevail, and I know today's signing will lead to more success stories like this one. So with that, let's get down to business.

First, we will sign Joint Declarations with the ambassadors from all four countries. Then, we will sign Letters of Arrangement between OSHA, the Wage and Hour Division and the four embassies. These Letters provide the structure for the day to day operations of the partnership. Ambassadors, I look forward to working together in the months and years ahead.

I want you to know you have a friend at the Department of Labor. Thank you so much for being here.