

Remarks for Secretary Hilda L. Solis
40th Anniversary of the Federal Coal Mine Health and Safety Act of 1969
Department of Labor
Tuesday, March 23, 2010

Good afternoon, everyone.

Thank you, Joe, for that introduction and for your hard work leading the Mine Safety Health Administration!

Joe is a former coal miner and for more than 40 years, he has worked to improve every aspect of miner health and safety, both in the United States and internationally.

I am so proud to have him leading MSHA.

What an impressive turnout this is.

Your presence here today speaks volumes about the magnitude of this landmark legislation we are commemorating.

It is gratifying to see members of labor, management and government gather together to mark the anniversary of the passage of the Federal Mine Health and Safety Act of 1969.

There is one missing component, however. And in my opinion...the most important one.

This law was passed on the heels of a horrific mine explosion in West Virginia that killed 78 miners.

The driving force behind the passage of the Coal Mine Act was not the lobbyists, or the unions, or the government regulators. It was the widows of those 78 men.

Not satisfied to stand by and simply grieve, they demanded change.

These brave women asked their former Congressman Ken Hechler to a meeting, where they asked for his help in to ensure that their husbands did not die in vain.

They called for tougher safety and health regulations for future generations of coal miners.

This was accomplished not through the voice of Mr. Hechler, but through their own voices.

These brave women traveled to Washington on several occasions to urge Congress to take action, and their testimony was a springboard to change.

One of those outspoken women was Sarah Kaznoski, whose husband Pete was a fire boss.

On that fateful day, Pete had agreed to fill in for a section foreman who had been injured days earlier.

As I understand it, Sarah spoke at the event commemorating the 25th anniversary of the Coal Mine Act.

Sadly, she passed away two years ago. Otherwise, I am certain she would not have wanted to miss today's event.

I admire Sarah, and all the widows of Farmington. I applaud what they were able to accomplish.

Forty years have passed since the Federal Mine Health and Safety Act of 1969 went into effect.

And in those 40 years, we've seen incredible changes in mine safety.

I was fortunate to witness many of those changes myself when I toured an underground coal mine in West Virginia last summer.

I was impressed by the equipment they use today, and by all the technological advances and safety and health improvements that have been put in place.

The year the Act was signed, more than 200 coal miners lost their lives in mines across this country.

Last year, that number had dropped to 18 – the lowest number of coal mine deaths since the government first began keeping such records.

While we applaud such an achievement, this is not meant to diminish the lives that were lost.

No miner – no workers in any occupation – should ever have to lose their lives in order to provide for their families.

When I took the job as Secretary of Labor a little more than a year ago, I vowed to follow through with President Obama's mission to create new job opportunities for American families, and to ensure that workers have fair, safe and healthy workplaces.

I made that pledge on behalf of all of America's workers, including the nearly 400,000 who work in our nation's mines.

As we commemorate the 40th anniversary of the Mine Act, we rededicate ourselves to defending and enforcing the right that every working man and woman deserves a safe and healthful working environment.

Thank you for all of your hard work and dedication on behalf of the working families of our country.

God bless America, and God bless our nation's miners.