

“Lessons from Seattle: New Horizons for Workers’ Benefits and Worker Protections.”

Testimony of Rebecca Saldaña, Washington State Senator, 37th Legislative District before the US House of Representatives Select Committee on Economic Disparity and Fairness in Growth

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Good Afternoon Chair Himes, Ranking Member Steil and esteemed members of the committee. For the record my name is Rebecca Saldaña, Washington State Senator from the 37th LD which includes our historic redlined communities Central District, Chinatown-International District, the Rainier Valley, and unincorporated King County Skyway.

My father grew up in segregated southern Texas picking cotton as a child. His sisters worked as domestics cleaning houses and providing childcare. At age 14 he left to follow the crops first to Michigan, and next to Oregon. Eventually, ending up in Seattle landing a union factory job. He became a shop steward, learned to negotiate contracts, volunteered as a baseball coach, and became a naturalized citizen voting in every election. Most importantly, when he worked extra, he earned overtime pay, and he had health insurance allowing us to go to the dentist. My aunts back in Texas didn’t.

But it was in college as a campus minister and theology major that I came to meet agricultural workers working hops in Oregon and families living in cars along the Columbia River picking cherry and apples in Washington...I met Seattle day laborers and dishwashers. It blew my mind and enraged me that these workers and their families were living and working in similar conditions as my father 30+ years later.

All work, especially care work deserves dignity, respect, and real wages so one can provide for one’s family. The COVID-19 pandemic made it clear that certain work is [essential work](#). But despite hashtags, our US economy and government policies continue to treat those who care for our children and our sick, who harvest, pack, prepare and serve our food, and who clean our homes and buildings as sacrificial. It is not a coincidence that such work has historically been done by forced labor, by womxn, immigrants, Black and Brown workers-- a sad legacy of racist, sexist and xenophobic policies.

That is why studying theology led me to become union organizer and a leader of [Puget Sound Sage](#), a regional partner of [Power Switch Action](#), that cultivates worker and community coalitions to win policies that decrease economic disparities and increase fairness to growth by investing in the leadership of people of color to improve the health and wealth of their families. It is what I believe brings you to here today to hear our story and compelled me to serve in the State Senate.

Way back in 1998, with the leadership of organized labor and the faith community, the people of Washington State passed a statewide ballot initiative requiring a cost-of-living adjustment to minimum wage. After our last recession, the [Change to Win](#) unions invested significant resources to canvas communities in South King County and South Seattle - hospitality, service, and fast-food workers told us of their needs for higher wages, job security, and paid sick and safe time. From their needs and their leadership, a coalition formed of workers, unions, local small business owners, faith leaders, and public health professionals that pushed the City of Seattle to adopt a city wide paid sick and safe time in 2010.

When the Airlines and the Port of Seattle would not exercise their authority to raise conditions for airport workers, airport workers and the coalition took the cause to the people of the City of Seatac through a ballot initiative—and won. The slogan was The Fight for \$15 but [Proposition 1](#) included much more.

From Seatac, fast food workers and [Working Washington](#) marched to Seattle taking the fight for \$15 citywide. The mayor formed a taskforce, including stakeholders and community leaders to draft the city ordinance, taking effect in 2015. In the meantime, the state legislature failed to act, so in 2016 the coalition launched another statewide ballot initiative and won.

This set the stage for 2018 when the WA State Legislature with bipartisan leadership passed the most [progressive Paid Family Medical Leave program](#). [Similar legislation](#) had been introduced by Senator Karen Keiser in 2002 and in 2007, the state created an unfunded family leave program. In 2015, our state secured a federal grant to begin designing a paid family leave program. In 2017, the first Latina City Councilmember Lorena Gonzalez advanced legislation guaranteeing 12 weeks of paid parental leave to City of Seattle employees, and an [ambitious proposal](#) to expand paid family medical leave to private employees. This along with favorable statewide polling, Seattle business chamber support, and the history of past successful ballot initiatives motivated the parties to stay at the negotiating table. The result: my first year in the senate, I co-sponsored and voted to give families paid family and medical leave insurance, which arrived when they needed it most in 2020.

You will hear from the other panelists how our story continues to unfold. I am available for questions.

Recommendations:

- Authorize more local innovation and demonstration funding grants that decrease disparities and increase fairness to growth.
- Comprehensive Immigration Reform that creates pathways to legal work status and citizenship for undocumented essential workers, job creators and their families, including the approximate 275,000 who reside in Washington State.
- Raise the minimum wage and tie it to an annual Cost of Living Adjustment.

- Remove sub minimum wage for tipped workers, workers with disabilities, and incarcerated individuals.
- Strengthen the rights of workers to organize, collectively bargain over their working conditions, and co-enforce labor laws.
- Create a paid family leave program and social insurance program like, [WA Cares](#).
- Pass [Domestic Worker Bill of Rights](#)
- Pass the [US PRO Act](#)

Additional and background information from Washington State on how to decrease disparities and increase fairness in growth.

First, center workers who have been historically made invisible, undervalued, and left out. Second, close the loopholes that exclude these workers (regardless of employment or immigration status) from current worker rights, benefits, protections, and safety net. Third, raise wages, benefits, protections, and enforcement of their rights. Fourth, create new pathways for them to access historically higher paid jobs so all work allows workers, and their families can thrive and fully participate in civic and community life.

- I. Getting rid of exemptions and exclusions.
 - A. Through legislation in 1986 exemptions to child labor laws and workers compensation were removed for agricultural workers.
 - B. For the purposes of bargaining the State becomes the employer for childcare workers, health care workers, and interpreters to organize and professionalize their industry through the right to bargain, professional development, and improving wages/rates.
 - C. Dairy workers sued the dairy industry and [WA State Supreme Court ruled](#) that a dairy worker should not be excluded from over time pay. The ruling created legal uncertainty for the rest of the agricultural industry.
 - i. This resulted in WA State 2021 [legislation](#) to remove the overtime exemption for agricultural workers over a [three year phase out](#).
- II. Modernizing our safety net to be more inclusive, responsive, resilient.
 - A. The minimum wage in WA State includes an annual automatic COLA and paid sick safe time in 1998.
 - B. Progressive [Paid Family Medical Leave Act](#) passed in a 2017 special session. First introduced in 2002. 2015 State secures a federal grant to begin designing a paid leave program.
 - C. Address disparate access for certain workers from current benefits like workers compensation, unemployment insurance, non-discrimination.
 - i. [SB5835](#) would remove language from workers compensation that compensates at a lesser rate unmarried heads of household earners

when they found to be made temporarily or permanently disabled while on the job.

- ii. [Expand state worker's compensation](#) system for domestic workers and day laborers.
- iii. [Worker Relief Fund](#) provided more than \$60 million in economic relief for workers impacted by covid but ineligible for all federal covid relief.
- iv. [SB 5438](#) would create a state only wage insurance program for workers who are ineligible for federal unemployment benefits due to immigration status.

D. In 2015, [CASA Latina](#) day laborers advanced a [wage theft ordinance](#).

E. Long Term Care Trust ([WA-Cares](#))

1. Washington state is the first in the nation to develop a way to make long-term care affordable for all workers in the state as we age. WA Cares Fund is a new earned benefit to ensure working Washingtonians can access long-term care when they need it.
2. WA Cares Fund was designed to offer a modest benefit at an affordable cost. The program provides everyone with a modest level of coverage and people who want more can buy supplemental private insurance, much like how Social Security and 401(k) plans work together.
3. Long Term Care needs federal partnership to build the portability and level of funding needed by workers and their families.

F. [Local Worker Boards and Portable Benefits](#) can expand worker financial security and drive broader economic prosperity. [Portable benefits](#) that follow workers are not a new idea (COBRA health insurance coverage, 401K and Social Security).

- i. [Universal Worker Protections Act](#) introduced in 2019.
- ii. [Domestic Worker Bill of Rights](#)
 1. State Study on removing domestic worker exemption from workers compensation.

G. Transportation Network Companies Driver led solutions

- i. After more than five years of dueling legislation, [HB 2076](#) made Washington the first state in the nation to offer statewide workplace standards and protections to tens of thousands of rideshare drivers – including guaranteeing a minimum wage, paid sick time, access to workers' compensation, and protection from unfair deactivations.
- ii. Built on a [series of improving labor standards for TNC](#) drivers Fair Share Plan, Drivers Deactivation Rights and Minimum Compensation ordinances.

- iii. The Federal PUA created critical flexible support to workers and our local businesses when we needed it most. It also helped inform the TNC bill that just passed this session.
- III. Strengthen Enforcement and Co-Enforcement models
 - A. City of Seattle establishes dedicated revenue for the [Office of Labor Standards](#)
- IV. Remove barriers to construction and historically higher paying careers
 - A. Fair Chance for [employment](#) and [college admission](#)..
 - B. Pre-Apprenticeship & Supportive Services ([PASS](#)) Grant program sponsored by State Rep. Jayapal
 - C. [Apprenticeship model expansions deliver multiple benefits](#).
 - i. [SB 5764](#) creates permeable pathways between apprenticeship programs and college.
 - ii. [SB 5600](#) expands apprenticeships across the board, with stated goal to mitigate work force shortages. Health care, maritime, manufacturing, high technology and education are among the sectors identified as high-skill, high-job-growth areas for innovative apprenticeships.
 - iii. [International Medical Graduates Clinical Experience licenses](#) give refugee and immigrant health care professionals to help care for vulnerable Washingtonians and address the workforce shortages.
 - D. Inclusion policies and high road community workforce agreements.
 - i. City of Seattle and King County through their race and social equity initiatives adopted an [inclusion policy](#) for Women and Minority owned businesses along with a [Priority Hire program](#) and [Community Workforce Agreements](#).
 - ii. [Seattle Equitable Development Initiative](#) is an approach to creating healthy vibrant communities with the goals to prevent displacement and increase access to opportunity for marginalized populations.
- V. Wages and workplace protections alone cannot address the impacts of structural and environmental racism built into land use policies and practices that exacerbate the costs of health care, housing, transportation, and childcare. A few of promising policies and practices to make sure increased wages result in higher quality of life:
 - i. [Seattle Equitable Development Initiative](#) is an approach to creating healthy vibrant communities with the goals to prevent displacement and increase access to opportunity for marginalized populations.
 - ii. The passage of the [Healthy Environment for All Act](#) in 2021 was a historic step toward eliminating environmental and health disparities. First statewide law in Washington State to create a coordinated state agency approach to environmental justice. Establishes an environmental justice taskforce and covers seven state agencies.

- iii. [Fair Start for Kids](#) makes child care more accessible and affordable for all families in Washington State.
- iv. Tax policy that support high wealth individuals and large corporations to pay what they owe with [capital gains](#) and [wealth tax](#) and provide relief for small businesses with an expanded [small business tax credit](#) and lowest wage earners by funding the [Working Families Tax credit](#).
- v. HB 1015 creates the Equitable Access to Credit Program to award grants to community development financial institutions to give historically underserved communities access to credit.
- vi. [Strengthened tenant rights](#) and increasing investments in state Housing Trust Fund and supportive housing models.