



Testimony of Danielle Alvarado, Executive Director of Working Washington & Fair Work Center, before the U.S. House Select Committee on Economic Disparity & Fairness in Growth, August 9, 2022

Thank you Chairman Himes, Ranking Member Steil, and members of the Select Committee on Economic Disparity & Fairness in Growth for the opportunity to testify. It's an honor to join you here in Washington's 7th Congressional District, home of Representative Jayapal and the strongest labor standards in the country.

My name is Danielle Alvarado. I'm the Executive Director of Working Washington & Fair Work Center, a statewide organization of low-wage workers united across industries to improve our working conditions and our lives. Many of our members are historically excluded workers, including people of color, Black workers, immigrants, women, people with disabilities, and LGBTQ+ people, single parents, and others. Our organization has led the campaigns to pass many of the local laws mentioned today, as well as the efforts to enforce them. I am here today to share lessons from how workers in our region have organized to win groundbreaking new labor standards, address skyrocketing inequality, and ensure everyone in our community can afford the basics.

Seattle's economy is strong, not in spite of our nation-leading labor standards, but because of them. As we've faced various economic crises over the past decade—whether it's the fallout from the 2008 Recession or the ongoing pandemic—our region has tackled rising inequality and unaffordability head-on with worker-driven policies to lift up the poor and improve economic security for all. And, as you've heard from each panelist today, we're better for it.

Our successes here provide a roadmap for the rest of the country. There are four key lessons that I want to highlight today.

1. Local Leadership on Workplace Protections Matters, Especially for Historically Excluded Workers

When workers in Seattle won the nation's first \$15 minimum wage ordinance in 2014, it meant 1 in 4 Seattle workers got a raise — making it one of the largest economic boosts

for workers in recent American history¹. More than 100,000 people now have more money in their pockets to pay bills and save up for emergencies; restaurant workers can afford to eat; airport workers can afford the trip home; and people can occasionally treat themselves to a dinner at a neighborhood restaurant to celebrate a birthday or anniversary, cycling money back into the local economy.

Nearly a decade later, the federal minimum wage is still just \$7.25/hour. Meanwhile, Seattle minimum wage has risen with the CPI to \$17.27/hour. Our statewide minimum wage also leads the nation at \$14.49/hour. It's proof that at the local level, we can win meaningful changes for workers—and we can do it by challenging what people in power consider to be “possible”, “reasonable”, or “realistic”. For instance, a \$15 minimum wage was once widely viewed by much of the political establishment as an impossible demand; but in the years since workers in Seattle won the Fight for 15, the movement has spread to dozens of cities across the country and lifted wages by \$150 billion for 26 million people.²

Our victories in Washington aren't just about what we've won, but who has benefitted. We have taken on some of the most deeply entrenched, intentional, and racist labor standards exclusions because we know workers' rights are a racial justice issue. In Seattle, nannies and house cleaners passed the first municipal Domestic Workers Bill of Rights to establish basic protections in their industry, ending an exclusion rooted in the legacy of slavery. Workers across industries came together to win the strongest state overtime protections in the country for tens of thousands of overworked and underpaid salaried workers. And this year, for the first time, Washington farmworkers are earning overtime, ending this racist exclusion from fundamental workplace protection. These victories are key pieces of a broader commitment to racial justice; they are chipping away at an economic system that for too long has trapped workers of color at the bottom.

2. Local Government Can Quickly Respond to Emerging Needs, Ensuring Workers are Not Left Behind as the Economy Changes

The power of local leadership is also obvious in moments of crisis, like the COVID-19 pandemic. When COVID took hold, many restaurant workers and other service industry workers lost their jobs. Some were unemployed for months, and others turned to food delivery apps like DoorDash and Instacart for work. They instantly lost their basic labor rights—all because these apps treat workers as independent contractors.

Gig workers with our PayUp campaign jumped into action, successfully organizing at the Seattle City Council to pass first-in-the-nation emergency hazard pay and sick time ordinances. The City Council also established a city-administered relief fund to provide crisis assistance to the many thousands of people who were suddenly struggling to stay

¹ Puget Sound Sage, [“Economic and Equity Outcomes of a \\$15/hr Minimum Wage in Seattle”](#) (2014).

² National Employment Law Project, [“Fight for \\$15 Movement Has Won \\$150B in Wage Raises for 26B Workers In Less Than a Decade”](#) (2021).

a float. As gig companies raked in cash and their executives became billionaires, these emergency measures kept frontline workers safe, healthy, and able to make ends meet.

And those emergency measures laid the groundwork for long term solutions. In May of this year, the Seattle City Council unanimously passed our PayUp policy, the only worker-led law in the country to permanently raise pay, protect flexibility, and provide transparency for tens of thousands of gig workers on apps like DoorDash, Instacart, and Uber Eats.³

Too often in times of crisis, politicians turn to austerity and make draconian cuts to the social safety net. In Seattle, we've shown a more effective way forward—that the right response to a crisis is to invest in workers. When more people have more money to make rent, pay bills, and feed their families, we're all better off.

3. Strong Labor Protections Require Enforcement Investments & Innovation

We know these rights are only real when they're enforced—and when that doesn't happen, it's people of color, immigrant workers, and other historically excluded groups who are more likely to experience labor standards violations than their peers.⁴

We've paired our innovative Seattle laws with cutting-edge enforcement strategies, which are a national model. First, the City established the Office of Labor Standards (OLS) to provide additional agency enforcement capacity that complements our state labor agency, the Department of Labor and Industries. Creating local labor agencies is an innovative step that a handful of other progressive cities have also taken across the country, and it has been essential to ensuring that Seattle's ordinances mean something to our members. To date, OLS has returned nearly 25 million dollars to over 40,000 Seattle workers through hundreds of settlements and enforcement actions.⁵

Seattle's ordinances include stronger enforcement tools than federal labor laws, giving OLS more ways to ensure that employers who break the law are held accountable. OLS engages in strategic enforcement, rather than relying on the entrenched labor investigation norm of only responding to individual complaints. By focusing resources on priority issues and industries, OLS is able to recover more money for workers, tackle the enforcement gap for historically excluded workers, and hold bad actor employers accountable.

³ Seattle Times, "[Seattle City Council Passes Pay Up Bill Raising Wages for Certain Gig Workers](#)" (2022).

⁴ Fair Work Center, "*Wage Theft In King County*", 2022 "Indeed, King County is similar to the state and nation as a whole in that people of color, immigrants, and women in King County disproportionately experience wage theft. Hispanic and Black workers suffer minimum wage violations at double the rate of white workers. Bosses steal wages from noncitizen workers at twice the rate of citizens. Women are also significantly (20 percent) more likely than men to experience minimum wage violations. The intersection of race, ethnicity, citizenship, and gender only compound these disparities. For example, noncitizen Hispanic women were approximately 4.5 times more likely to experience a minimum wage violation than white female citizens. And women who are Black noncitizens were more than 5 times more likely to experience a minimum wage violation than their white counterparts with citizenship."; see also Daniel Galvin, *Deterring Wage Theft: Alt-Labor, State Politics, and the Policy Determinants of Minimum Wage Compliance*, 14. Persp. On Pol. 324 (2016)

⁵ Seattle Office of Labor Standards, "[Office of Labor Standards Marks Seven Year Anniversary](#)" (2022).

Most critically, since its creation, OLS has invested millions of dollars in its Community Outreach and Education Fund (COEF), which funds trusted community organizations to conduct Know Your Rights outreach and serve as a bridge between hard-to-reach worker communities and government—including historically excluded workers who fear retaliation. This program is crucial because it resources grassroots organizations, which have a deep understanding of what our community members need. It's a base of knowledge and relationships that we can share with OLS to inform its outreach and enforcement work. In OLS, we have an agency partner that understands power imbalances in the workplace and the critical role worker organizations play in dismantling those disparities. Investing in community partnerships strengthens both enforcement and organizing: after all, when people see that their existing rights actually mean something, they're much more likely to believe that change is possible in the future.⁶

4. Effective Labor Standards Requires Strong Worker Organizing

We are proud of our partners in local government. And, it's critical to understand that the progress we've made in Washington would not have happened without strong worker organizing. It was workers at SeaTac airport who led the minimum wage campaign that established the first \$15 living wage in the country. And it was workers who led a 13-mile march from SeaTac to Seattle, kicking off dozens of fast food strikes and a public campaign that led to Seattle adopting its minimum wage ordinance within a year.

Time and time again, what we have seen is that workers know better than anyone what needs to change about our economy. Restaurant and retail workers led the fight for our Secure Scheduling Ordinance, which ensures they get basic information in advance about when they're working, after enduring years of erratic notices and "clopening" shifts. Domestic workers directly provide recommendations to the City Council on future policy proposals through an industry standards board. And gig workers spent a year directly engaging in formal policy review processes before our bill was passed.

In Seattle, we recognize that workers are the experts in their own lives—and our economy is better for it. We also recognize that lifting up the most-excluded workers often means organizing in industries that are tough to unionize. Every job should be a good job, and worker centers like ours complement the work of our union partners as we build the latest iteration of the labor movement that leaves no one behind.

Our Priorities for the Future

While we've achieved some powerful victories in the Seattle area, there is still more work to be done. Growing income inequality remains a top concern, especially given that Washington has no state income tax. That means that while some of the wealthiest people on earth live here, our regressive tax code leaves too many workers struggling to make ends meet while the rich get richer.

⁶ Elizabeth Ford, *Wage Recovery Funds*, 110 Calif. L.Rev 101 (2022).

There's an urgent need to continue strengthening statewide labor standards and to bring them up to speed with Seattle's gains. As COVID made egregiously clear, despite being stronger than most, our state safety net has unacceptable shortcomings: we need universal access to unemployment and paid family & medical leave, robust health and safety protections with stronger penalties, and standards that reflect climate change's impact on workers. We need deeper investments in labor standards enforcement, including investments in community-based education and enforcement, as well as minimum protections for gig and domestic workers outside Seattle.

And of course we see the need to strengthen our labor standards and enforcement infrastructure at the federal level. I urge Congress to prioritize:

- Raising federal minimum wage and ensure it is regularly adjusted with CPI
- Eliminating industry minimum standards exclusions, including passing the National Domestic Workers Bill of Rights
- Establishing robust federal safety net to ensure that all workers can safely access work and care for their families, including universal access to paid family and medical leave, unemployment, and workers' compensation
- Committing dedicated funding for federal agencies to community based enforcement partnerships, particularly the NLRB, DOL, and EEOC
- Strengthening current federal agency enforcement tools and practices, including creating directed investigations initiatives, increasing fines, fees, interest collection, and penalties in workplace enforcement
- Continuing to encourage local and state governments to adopt higher standards building on federal minimum requirements

We are committed to ensuring that no matter where we live, we all have access to safe, fairly paid, dignified work. Making this aspiration a reality is essential to a thriving economy, ending the crisis of income inequality, and advancing racial equity for our communities. We are ready to continue leading the way. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.