



Opening Statement

COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION & LABOR

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The Hon. Robert C. "Bobby" Scott • Chairman

Opening Statement of Madam Chairwoman Frederica Wilson (FL-24), Subcommittee on Health, Employment, Labor, and Pensions

Subcommittee on Health, Employment, Labor, and Pensions Hearing
Protecting Workers' Right to Organize: The Need for Labor Law Reform
2175 Rayburn House Office Building
Tuesday, March 26, 2019 | 10:15 a.m.

Today's hearing is an important opportunity to examine the threats to workers' rights and explore proposals that will improve the quality of life for millions of workers and their families.

America's unions are engines of economic mobility. For generations, they have fueled our nation's prosperity, protected the health and safety of American workers, and supported a strong middle class.

Beyond fighting for better wages and benefits, unions safeguard equal pay for equal work. They advocate well beyond their membership to ensure that all workers can achieve economic mobility. As Congress considers measures to close the wage gaps for women and people of color, unions play an essential role in fostering pay equity.

Strong unions played a central role in building a robust middle class in this country, and they are essential to rebuilding it again.

Simply put, if you claim to back the interests of working people, you must also be pro-union.

The right to join a union is an internationally-recognized human right. Unfortunately, the combination of weak labor laws, intensification of employer opposition to unions, and relentless political attacks have driven union membership to historic lows.

Roughly a third of American workers were in a union in 1956. Today, just one in 10 workers is in a union. This shift has had widespread consequences for working families and the middle class.

As union membership decreased from 27.1 percent to 11.1 percent between 1973 and 2015, the share of income going to the top 10 percent skyrocketed from 31.9 percent to 47.8 percent.

Over the past 4 decades, wages for the typical worker have stagnated. The link between rising productivity and higher pay has been broken. When union membership hovered around 30 percent between the end of World War II and 1973, wage growth was in lockstep with increased productivity by over 90 percent.

However, between 1973 and 2017, productivity increased by 73 percent, but wages have only grown by 12.3 percent, adjusting for inflation. Let me underscore this important point: the decline in union membership has eroded the link between growing productivity and rising pay. It has stagnated wages for American workers. Inequality and wage stagnation are not natural products of a functioning economy. They are the result of policy choices that have stripped workers of the power to stand together and bargain for fairer wages, benefits and working conditions.

We have seen this consistently in the Trump administration's policy decisions as President Trump has sided with big corporations at the expense of workers and unions. Under this administration, the National Labor Relations Board has empowered employers to:

- Gerrymander and interfere in union representation elections,
- Misclassify employees as contractors to deny them their rights, and
- Retaliate against workers who exercise their First Amendment rights.

This is simply unacceptable.

That is why, during the last Congress, Committee Democrats introduced legislation to ensure that workers have strong bargaining rights and protections from unscrupulous employers.

This Congress, the Committee will continue the effort to strengthen labor laws so that workers can stand together and negotiate for a fair return on their work.

Today we will explore the strengths and weaknesses in the current state of labor law, and identify proposals that:

- Hold employers that violate the law accountable,
- Protect collective action, and
- Modernize labor laws for a changing economy.

If Congress is truly on the side of American workers, then we must protect their right to bargain for better wages and better working conditions.

This hearing is an important step towards that goal.

I want to thank all of our witnesses for being with us today and I look forward to your testimony.

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