

# RWDSU

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**Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union**

**New York State Senate Committees on Labor, Banks, and Investigations and Government Operations and the New York State Assembly Committees on Labor, Banks, and Oversight, Analysis, and Investigation**

**Testimony regarding the impact of COVID-19 on the workforce  
August 13<sup>th</sup>, 2020**

My name is Stuart Appelbaum and I am the President of the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union, RWDSU. We represent approximately 100,000 workers, including workers in retail and grocery stores, pharmacies, food processing, car washes, nursing homes, and non-profit social service organizations.

I cannot overstate the impact of COVID-19 on the members of RWDSU. It has been deadly. X # of members have been killed by this disease. It has shut down the retail industry, causing tens of thousands of workers to lose their jobs, and what we know for certain is that retail will not reopen as the same industry it was before. It has resulted in workers in the grocery store industry, many of whom earn the minimum wage, fearing for their lives every day they show up to this “essential” job. And as everyone has heard, it has caused untold misery in the poultry and meatpacking industries.

What I would like to focus on, however, is the role of the government, employers and unions in determining the outcome of this tragedy.

Our experience with New York State is that a clear plan with enforceable standards can set the right trajectory in motion. For example, requiring that all customers in retail and grocery must wear masks has created a clear standard that everyone can understand. Employers have responded to this clear standard, as there is almost no store in NY that lacks a sign on the front door saying, “No Mask, No Service.” There is no doubt in my mind that this policy has saved workers’ lives and contributed significantly to NY’s lowering the curve on infections. Clear, enforceable standards from the government create a clear standard for employers to follow and ultimately it is the workers who are protected.

Let me also note that prior to the No Mask, No Service standard being put in place, most union employers already had such a requirement in place. Why? Because unions have bargaining power in the workplace and we demanded that our employers, from the outset, do the utmost to protect their workers. This is the value of workplace democracy and in moments like this, during a pandemic, that the value of unions comes into sharp relief.

As I mentioned before, members of the RWDSU have had very different experiences during the pandemic. About half of our members work in essential industries, and the other half in non-essential industries. Many “non-essential” workers have been laid off or furloughed and their

return to work is uncertain. Many workers in these industries, like apparel retail, earn low wages and had little financial cushion prior to the crisis. These workers will continue to need financial and other support as the pandemic continues.

Before moving to legislative recommendations, I want to make one last point. Workers who do not have work authorization under this country's racist immigration policies are completely barred from being able to receive Unemployment Insurance. For months, carwashes were closed. Even though they have largely reopened, hours are still reduced, and workers now owe months and months in back rent that they have no hope of paying. Although carwashers have been paying into the unemployment system for years, often for decades, they were not able to receive a single penny of UI. Many of them have citizen children, but that makes no difference. Some of them died, and their spouses were left with no income at all. Of course our own members in the union have been able to count on the union for some support. But even we cannot possibly help them make up the backlog of bills. And this is not the only industry - many other sectors have huge numbers of undocumented workers who have been left in an income crisis that the rest of us can only begin to comprehend.

This is why we urge you to set up an Excluded Workers Fund. The Mark-to-Market Billionaires Wealth Tax / Excluded Worker Bailout Act (A10414/S8277A) sponsored by Assembly Member Carmen de la Rosa and Senator Jessica Ramos would do exactly what we need. The key is that workers excluded from UI deserve and need monthly income replacement back to the start of the crisis. That is what is fair.

There are a few key legislative items, in addition to the above, that we encourage the Senate and Assembly to work on to support workers and get our economy back on track.

- Introduce and pass the New York Health & Essential Rights Act, or NY HERO, a bill that would require all businesses to adopt enforceable safety and health standards to protect workers from exposure and spread of COVID-19. This bill would also allow workers to create workplace health and safety committees. While such committees exist at our union shops, most non-union workplaces lack this important tool for workplace monitoring.
- Legalize cannabis, with strong labor standards. This will generate much-needed revenue and high-quality jobs during this time of crisis.
- Reform the Partial Unemployment Penalty (Stirpe A446/Ramos S5754). Workers should not be penalized for finding part-time work while on unemployment.
- Tax those who can pay and help workers in the process by passing the Mark-to-Market Billionaire Wealth Tax/Excluded Worker Bailout Act (De la Rosa A10414/Ramos S08277).
- Pass the Safe Staffing for Quality Care Act (Rivera S1032/Gottfried A2954) to improve patient and worker safety.

Now more than ever we need bold ideas to protect workers and build back better. We look forward to working with you and our other labor and community partners to fight this pandemic and create a more just and equal economy that works for all.