

MAY 19, 2020

BROWN FIGHTS FOR ESSENTIAL WORKERS AND THEIR FAMILIES DURING CONGRESSIONAL HEARING

WASHINGTON, D.C. — U.S. Sen. Sherrod Brown (D-OH) – ranking member of the U.S. Senate Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs – delivered the following opening statement at today’s hearing entitled ‘The Quarterly CARES Act Report to Congress.’

Sen. Brown’s remarks, as prepared for delivery, follow:

I’d again like to thank Chairman Crapo for following the best advice of health experts, and holding a virtual hearing to prevent the spread of coronavirus.

I am still outraged by Leader Mitch McConnell’s reckless decision to keep the Senate in session, putting Capitol Hill workers – including Capitol police officers, custodial staff, floor staff, and cafeteria workers – putting all workers at risk.

Leader McConnell has forced workers to go against public health authorities’ advice for three weeks now, and he still has no plan to get additional help to families and communities. The House passed a bill that incorporates many of our plans. The American people are rising to this challenge – and their leaders are failing them. Leader McConnell says he sees no urgency – his words, no urgency.

Before we begin, I'd like to pause here for a moment to recognize all the workers who have lost their lives on the job during this pandemic.

The coronavirus has been the great revealer. It's brought out the best in our communities – we remember the spirit of solidarity that created our social safety net during the New Deal, and inspired World War II victory gardens, and powered the Civil Rights movement. And today that spirit of solidarity is now revealing itself in hand-sewn masks, and fire escape applause for hospital workers, and video conference play-dates, as millions of individual Americans pull together to do their part to flatten the curve.

But this pandemic is also laying bare how corporations that now claim their workers are “**essential**,” have for too long treated them as more of a cost to be minimized.

Since the bailouts of the financial crisis, many of us have been concerned about how our country rewards Wall Street, but ignores the people who make our country work.

Whenever we've asked why wages for these essential workers are stagnant, we're told we can't afford it – companies would have to raise prices if they paid people more. Never mind that CEOs were getting huge raises and Wall Street investors huge payouts. Never mind that low prices don't do you a lot of good if your wages stay low right along with them.

Our economy has been paying the price for that – with a shrinking middle class, rising inequality, and lower economic growth.

Now it's pretty clear: when millions of workers are laid off, or have their hours cut, or were making low wages to begin with and are now worried about their future, our economy grinds to a halt.

In fact, the only thing keeping our society running in the middle of this crisis is American workers – those who stock our shelves and deliver our packages and fill our prescriptions and care for our loved ones.

A grocery store worker in Ohio told me recently, “I don’t feel safe at work and they don’t pay me much. I don’t feel essential – I feel expendable.”

We are asking people to show up to work and risk their health, and their families’ safety – perhaps finally realizing that the words of Dr. King ring true – that “One day our society will come to respect the sanitation worker...for the person who picks up our garbage, in the final analysis, is as significant as the physician, for if he doesn’t do his job, diseases are rampant. All labor has dignity.”

ALL labor has dignity.

You might think that at a time when we’re demanding more from our essential workers than ever before, that people who punch a clock or swipe a badge, people who take care of our families and our elderly—mostly women, often black and brown workers—you might think they’d all be getting a huge raise.

Our economy is supposed to reward people whose talents are in high demand. That’s what we’re all taught and that’s what the CEOs tell us, right?

But that’s not happening. Workers are getting left behind, again.

As essential workers go home to their families after a long, stressful day, they’re wondering how they’re going to pay the rent, or how they’re going to afford another week of groceries. And they wonder whether they’re going to infect their families.

And those are the ones that are working – how about the 35 million Americans who have been laid off from their jobs because of this public health crisis?

When we passed the CARES Act, we tried to address this. We tried to make sure that the trillions of dollars in spending wouldn’t just go to Wall Street like it always does. We wanted to make sure that the Federal Reserve and the Treasury got this money into workers’ pockets.

We certainly didn't want to see it go to oil and gas companies, whose activities pose an existential threat to essential workers and our whole economy.

Chairman Powell – I appreciate your recent comments about how Congress needs to do more to put money directly in workers' pockets – I agree.

If Congress does not act now to put money in the hands of the people who actually power our economy – in workers, their families, and Main Street businesses in struggling communities – we risk making the economic crisis worse.

Leader McConnell needs to let the Senate take up the House bill immediately.

Congress also has an important responsibility to make sure the \$500 billion we've already approved for the Fed and Treasury is actually getting to workers. And from what we know so far, it does not appear that this Administration or the Federal Reserve are making workers their priority.

Today I look forward to hearing from both of you, Mr. Secretary and Chair Powell, not about what you're doing for big banks or big corporations and how you expect that money to trickle down, but how you're making sure the money and authority Congress gave you actually help the people who make this country work.

I want to hear how it's going to be different this time.

I want you to explain what you will do to transform our economy so that it works for everyone – not just the wealthy and powerful.

I want to hear about your plans to make our economy work for essential workers, and how to safely get those who have lost their jobs back to work.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

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