

Ranking Member Brown – 6.2.2020

Opening Statement

Thank you, Mr. Chairman for holding this hearing.

The pandemic has been the ‘great revealer.’ It reminds us how vulnerable many Americans are, and how the economy and government policy tilt in favor of the wealthy, powerful, and privileged.

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

Long before this pandemic, millions of Americans knew that we have a system that treats them like they’re expendable. Their hard work isn’t paying off. For some it feels like the system is broken – and for black and brown workers, it never worked to begin with.

It’s those black and brown communities across our country who have been hit hardest by the coronavirus—they are more likely to get sick, they have less access to health care, they make up the communities hurt by redlining and Jim Crow laws, and they disproportionately make up our essential workers. It’s not because they don’t work as hard, it’s not because of individual choices – we ALL work hard, we’re ALL trying to do something productive for our family and our community, and we ALL want to build a better country for our daughters and our sons.

No, it's because of a system that has been making it harder for their work to pay off, and putting their lives at risk for generations – long before this virus appeared.

It doesn't matter if they are jogging in their neighborhoods, protesting injustice, asleep in their beds, or driving to the store. Black men and women know that systemic racism puts their lives and the lives of their children at risk. All the time.

This is their every day.

When Breonna Taylor was killed by police in Louisville and when George Floyd was killed by police in Minneapolis, people came to the streets across this country to peacefully protest. It is an expression of fear, grief, frustration, and anger. It is same grief we had in Cleveland when 12-year old Tamir Rice was gunned down by police in a park.

More Black sons and daughters and mothers and fathers killed by police officers, the very people who are supposed to protect all Americans. More death, when many are already grieving the loss of family members and friends to the coronavirus and grappling with the economic stress this pandemic has caused.

Black communities led the nation in mourning the killings of George Floyd and Breanna Taylor over the last week – leading calls for justice and long-term changes to dismantle systems of oppression.

And in the midst of that trauma and grieving, millions of those same Americans still go to work, day after day, week after week.

Our job is to show victims of systemic racism at the hands of their own government that the same government will protect them from this pandemic – that we hear them, that we see them, that we are fighting for them. And that their lives matter.

Our response to this crisis must be to stand behind the people who make this country work – all workers, whether you punch a clock or swipe a badge, earn a salary or make tips; whether you're raising children or caring for an aging parent. Whether your hard work isn't paying off now, or whether it's never paid off the way it should.

Not everything is about money. But the work we do on this committee should show Americans that the government is on their side. Our work on this committee needs to address wealth inequality and to make sure everyone is treated fairly.

But instead, we are repeating the mistakes of the past and helping the rich and powerful, and the corporations they run, while leaving most Americans to fend for themselves. We have committed trillions of dollars to bail out corporations, without requiring those corporations to take care of their workers.

As Dr. King said – “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.”

It's black and brown workers who have been robbed of their dignity on the job – far, far too often.

If we want to be a country where every person has dignity, we need to start by recognizing that all labor has dignity.

But so far, our response to this crisis is not the response of a government that believes that.

Congress can always find trillions of dollars for corporations – for tax cuts, for bailouts. But when hardworking families need help with rent, or to put food on the table, this president and this Congress say we can't afford it.

The president and his Administration had already made racial and economic inequality worse, and undone civil rights protections. They've been pretty clear they're willing to put workers' lives at risk – to reopen stockyards, or just to juice the stock market.

And last night, the President of the United States turned the arm of the state on peaceful protesters, teargassing the citizens he's supposed to serve and exploiting a house of worship, to stage a photo-op.

President Trump and his Administration believe that millions of Americans are expendable – and it's not a coincidence that many of the people they consider expendable are black and brown workers.

Since the president is unwilling to protect people – whether that's protecting their lives, or protecting their financial future – we must fill the leadership void.

I hope today's witnesses can shed light on what we must do to make sure the economic recovery isn't uneven and unjust, like the last one.

I'll close with this:

Whenever people bring up the ways the system has failed so many Americans – online, at a hearing, or at a protest march – there are always naysayers – always white, usually men, often pretty well off – who say, how can you be so negative? Why do you want to dwell on all the worst parts of history? Don't you love our country?

My response to our country's naysayers and sunshine patriots is this: how can you be so pessimistic as to believe this is the best we can do? Do you really think that the American people – with our ingenuity and optimism and tenacity – do you really think we can't create a fairer economy and a more just government? Do you truly believe we can't have a society that works for everyone – black and white and brown, women and men, no matter who you are or what kind of work you do?

Protesting, working for change, organizing, demanding our country do better – those are some of the most patriotic things all of us can do.

I love my country – and if you love this country, you fight for the people who make it work. ALL of them.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.