

Chairman Sherrod Brown
The Coronavirus Crisis: Paving the Way to An Equitable Recovery
Opening Statement
February 18, 2021

It should not be a surprise that our first hearing is about the coronavirus—it has affected every American’s health, home, family, workplace, and the entire economy for nearly the last year.

On this and on all of the issues to come before this committee, we are going to get to work for all the Americans who have not had much of a voice in Washington, or in our economy.

Ohioans and working families all over the country know what that’s like.

They have too much experience watching the largest multinational corporations thrive, while our communities get left behind.

Long before the great recession, our trade and tax policy abandoned the industrial heartland and working class towns and neighborhoods all over the country, too often with bipartisan support

Communities from the Mahoning Valley to the Mon Valley, from Newark, Ohio to Newark, New Jersey, all watched factory after factory close, with no plan to rebuild our local economies. Entire neighborhoods and entire towns hollowed out.

People felt like their hard work no longer paid off. And for Black and brown workers, it had never truly paid off like it should. They were the first to be preyed on by shady mortgage lenders, the first to lose their jobs, and the first to get foreclosed on.

Now they feel like they’re watching history repeat itself.

My colleagues on this committee have heard me say many times that this pandemic has been the “Great Revealer.” It’s laid bare what so many Americans already knew: that millions of workers have little economic security, and they can’t get a foothold in this economy, no matter how hard they work.

So many families are one emergency away from draining what little savings they have, or turning to a payday lender, or getting evicted.

If the bus quits running after 10 and she can’t make it to her night shift, she loses her job. If the restaurant where he works cuts back his hours, he has to choose between paying the rent or paying the electric bill.

Last year, I was talking to a grocery worker in Ohio who told me, “they call me ‘essential,’ but I feel expendable. They don’t pay me much, they don’t protect me at work.”

And it is not a coincidence that many of the workers corporations treat as expendable are Black and brown workers, and so often they are women.

This pandemic hasn’t just exposed racial disparities and income inequality and gender disparities – it’s made them worse.

Black and brown Americans are more likely to work in front-line jobs that can’t be done remotely, where they’re more likely to be exposed to the virus. They’re less likely to have paid leave, making them more likely to lose their job if they get sick or their child gets sick.

They have less savings to fall back on, because of generations of wealth inequality. Black small businesses have closed at twice the rate of white small businesses.

The 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.

And as for the toll this pandemic has taken on women, ask any mother how she's doing right now.

Millions of women have been doing three jobs for the last 11 months – they're full-time caregivers and teachers and doing the job they had before this pandemic. And notice, only one of those three jobs actually comes with a paycheck.

For 2.3 million women, they simply can't do all three – they've been forced out of the workforce altogether. And that means 2.3 million families are scraping by with less, trying to figure out how they'll pay the mortgage or pay for health insurance or pay for groceries this month.

It's always the same story – when the biggest banks and the largest corporation needs help, their allies in Washington spring into action. But when the rest of the country needs investment and support, they pretend we can't afford it.

Today, under new leadership on this committee, we have a clear message: Those days are over.

We will not settle for less.

Black and brown workers don't have to settle for a system that treats their lives as expendable. Mothers don't have to settle for doing three jobs, with no help. Small business owners don't have to settle for scraps, while they watch corporate profits soar.

Ohio and the rest of the country do not have to settle for a Wall Street-first recovery.

We are the world's richest country with the world's largest economy. We have the resources to rise to meet this challenge, for everyone.

That's what President Biden is doing, with his rescue plan. And it's what we will do on this committee, starting today.

Our witnesses today will make clear the importance of a recovery that supports all Americans.

We will hear from the president of the nation's largest transit workers union, who is working to keep his members safe while they ensure Americans can get to work or a doctor's appointment or the grocery store. We will hear from a legal aid attorney who is on the front line in Columbus, working with renters to keep people in their homes during a pandemic.

We will hear from a small business owner who is struggling to keep his doors open and his workers on the job. And we will hear from the mayor of an industrial town that has suffered disinvestment for decades, has been stereotyped by national pundits, and is now facing the same challenges as cities and towns and neighborhoods in all of our states.

These are the voices that have been ignored, shouted down, or even ridiculed by corporate elites, their newspaper of record, and too many in Washington. That ends now.

We will get help to people – all people – to stay in their homes, and pay their bills. We will keep the doors open at minority-owned businesses that entrepreneurs have worked their whole lives to build. We will keep our buses and our trains running, and keep those workers on the job.

This is about recovery, and it's about rebuilding. It's about empowering all Americans – no matter who you are, where you live, or what kind of work you do – and investing in all communities.

We will show the American people – all people – that their government is on their side. It's time to get to work.