



Re: Governor's Proposed FY 2022-2023 Budget for Department of Labor

Dear Appropriations Committee,

I am Catherine John, lead organizer for Black and Brown United In Action and we wholeheartedly support domestic workers as they are part of a very vulnerable workforce, most of whom are black and brown women, many of whom are immigrants. In fact, research by the Economic Policy Institute found that the vast majority (91.5%) of domestic workers are women and just over half are Black, Hispanic, or Asian American/Pacific Islander women and are also three times as likely to be living in poverty as other workers and fewer than one in 10 domestic workers are covered by an employer-provided retirement plan and just one in five receives health insurance coverage through their job. Domestic workers make other work possible, and providing baseline protections such as enforced wage laws will help make these necessary jobs better, safer jobs.

Domestic workers have historically been excluded from many of our country's labor laws. We've seen some of these horrific cases, where women are practically enslaved in private residences and have nowhere to turn, fearing retaliation including immigration consequences, often relying on the job for housing. These are unlike other workplaces, as the work happens in isolation, behind closed doors, leading to instances of severe exploitation including sexual harassment, underpayment of wages, extreme work hours with no time off. This important workforce in Connecticut and elsewhere primarily consists of immigrant women, who face additional fears and lack a safety net.

Domestic work in America is a large industry in which women are systematically exploited. Many domestic workers experience exploitation and wage theft repeatedly and are often primary and/or secondary victims of wage theft. In a study of 400 domestic workers across New Jersey in 2019, more than half of the workers (57%) had been victims of wage theft. Wage theft occurs when the employer pays less than the minimum wage, fails to pay overtime, or fails to pay at all. The current economic decline has made it harder for domestic workers to report violations because domestic workers have fewer job options when the economy is weak, making it harder to stand up to employers that shortchange them. Unchecked wage theft allows unscrupulous employers to undercut their law-abiding competitors and puts pressure on those competitors to shortchange their workers as well.

Currently, more than 60 million domestic workers around the world provide essential services so others can work outside their homes, keeping markets and economies working globally. Most, though not all, domestic workers are women and the vast majority are from the poorer sections of society. Domestic workers provide a range of services in private homes: they sweep and clean; wash clothes and dishes; shop and cook; care for children, the elderly, and the disabled; they provide gardening, driving, and security services. Some live on the premises of their employer. Others work part time, often for multiple employers. Trapped in economically abusive employment, domestic workers may receive little pay while

working long hours in dangerous conditions, In the United States as in other countries, domestic workers are often not viewed as “real” workers, and some employers liken their workers to “family” members.

Further research by the Economic Policy Institute finds that the United States’ 2.2 million domestic workers are underpaid, more likely to live in poverty than other workers, and are unprotected by U.S. labor law. Historically unappreciated, domestic work continues to be afforded little worth. In some cases, employers that had been obeying wage laws before the pandemic simply ceased doing so after it hit, counting on workers’ reluctance to push back. The Wage and Workplace Standards Division can improve wage enforcement by conducting outreach and education to domestic workers, and collaborating with community organizations such as Black and Brown United In Action, which will dramatically improve wage enforcement. The state of California dramatically improved wage enforcement by partnering with community organizations to do outreach, education, and enforcement to the most vulnerable workers.

In Connecticut, there are approximately 40,000 domestic workers who serve as housekeepers, nannies, and caregivers in private homes. Domestic workers play a critical role in Connecticut's economy, working to ensure the health and prosperity of Connecticut families and freeing others to participate in the workforce. Despite the value of their work caring for children, elders and homes, domestic workers have historically been excluded from the protections under state law extended to workers in other industries. However, despite the importance of their work, domestic workers have historically received wages well below the poverty line and continue to be excluded from some of the most fundamental labor protections other workers in Connecticut enjoy, such as enforced wage laws which will protect domestic workers in various ways including wage theft.

Lastly, domestic workers are, and have been on the front line of the coronavirus pandemic, caring for the sick, watching children, and keeping homes clean. They are providing essential work to families during this difficult time. The current legal landscape leaves them vulnerable to exploitation by bad employers. The Department of Labor's Wage and Workplace Standards Division needs more funding and staff because domestic workers are getting sick and dying, and are highly vulnerable to wage theft as well as other violations because their labor rights are unprotected.

Sincerely,

Catherine John  
Lead Organizer  
Black and Brown United in Action