



Service Employees International Union – Oregon State Council
6401 SE Foster ▪ Portland, OR 97206

February 24, 2021

Chair Power, Vice-Chair Wallan, and Members of the House Subcommittee on Civil Law

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of House Bill 2205. My name is Alberto Gallegos and I am submitting this testimony on behalf of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), Oregon State Council. SEIU Oregon is composed of SEIU Local 503 and SEIU Local 49, which together represent over 85,000 people. Local 49 represents private sector janitors, property service workers, light manufacturing, and healthcare workers; while Local 503 represents homecare workers, private nonprofit workers, in-home childcare providers, nursing home workers, and state and local government employees.

SEIU strongly supports HB 2205 to give workers the power they need to enforce their rights at work. As members of the Fair Shot for All Coalition we support this policy as part of the 2021 legislative agenda and our ongoing work to ensure racial, gender, and economic justice for residents in Oregon. Every worker deserves to be paid for a fair day's work and have their rights protected no matter what work they do, how much they earn, where they come from, or the color of their skin.

Over the past few decades, our state agencies charged with enforcing important labor protections have experienced a steady decline in funding and resources, while the size of Oregon's workforce has grown. Compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, wildfires, and an on-going economic crisis those agencies have been overwhelmed by complaints to which they do not have the capacity to respond.

Even when the state does have the capacity to enforce workplace laws, companies who violate worker protections rarely face meaningful penalties. In claims brought to the state between 2006 and 2019, only 1% of Oregon businesses found guilty of wage theft ended up paying penalties imposed by the state. Meanwhile, wage theft is a nationwide problem in every industry that acutely affects womxn, immigrants, and BIPOC workers who work low-wage, labor intensive jobs. In Oregon alone, wage theft claims submitted by workers between '06 and '19 amounted to more than \$50 million. As a labor union, we are able to support our members who are facing wage theft through our grievance process if they reach out to us about it. However, we understand that non-union workers do not have that level of support.

Furthermore, a lack of outreach, accessible information, and a fear of retaliation for speaking out has left Oregon's most vulnerable workers with little trust in the system that exists to protect them. Once workers lose trust in the system, they become demoralized and stop speaking out because they believe that nothing is going to change and that, in fact, the only thing that is likely to happen is retaliation from their employer. We don't want any workers to feel silenced.

Speaking out against your employer is not an easy thing to do. When workers do find the courage to speak up at work, they often face retaliation from employers. During COVID-19, a national survey found that Black workers were twice as likely to have experienced or witnessed retaliation for raising COVID-19 safety related concerns in their workplace, and twice as likely to have those issues remain unresolved. When state agencies do not have capacity to take on their cases, workers who face sexual harassment or discrimination at work are often left with no other avenues to address the harm that has been done to them.

The Just Enforcement Act would provide workers with a voice in their workplace and create a revenue stream for state agencies to increase enforcement capacity. Providing an avenue for workers to partner with trusted community organizations to file suits on the state's behalf would allow workers who fear speaking out alone and risking their jobs to have the community at their backs while they do so. SEIU urges you to support HB 2205.

Thank you,

Alberto Gallegos
Political and Government Relations Organizer
SEIU, Oregon State Council