

Testimony – Workforce Hearing

Hello, my name is Aine Chalmers and I am a member of Persist Brooklyn. Persist Brooklyn is a progressive advocacy group in Brooklyn that works to enact progressive policies on the local, state, and federal level. Additionally, we build coalitions with other progressive organizations to amplify and support their work. As a volunteer-run and volunteer-led organization, we have signed onto the “Fund Excluded Workers” coalition to support all workers in NY. Thank you for the opportunity to testify at today’s Workforce Hearing.

I am testifying today in support of an excluded worker bail out fund, which would deliver desperately needed income replacement assistance for New Yorkers ineligible for unemployment benefits. This includes New Yorkers that are undocumented and recently incarcerated, as well as those who operate within the cash economy and families that have lost their primary breadwinners due to the coronavirus pandemic. Senator Jessica Ramos plans to introduce a bill to create this fund (S8277B was introduced in 2019/2020) and Assemblymember Carmen de la Rosa will introduce an equivalent bill in the Assembly.

Excluded workers have gone nine months without any support and can wait no longer: this fund must be included in this year’s budget. Here’s why: the exclusion of some workers from assistance has also severely impacted members of their families. I have observed the impact this exclusion has had as a volunteer tutor to local high school and college students, many of whom are from immigrant families. Students have been forced to postpone or discontinue their studies after their undocumented parents lost their employment in the cash economy and did not receive any assistance. These students have been forced to discontinue their studies in order to support their families, and without support, it is uncertain that will be able to resume.

These stories are not unique: 597,000 undocumented New Yorkers are shut out of unemployment benefits even though they pay taxes into the system. Nearly 20,000 recently incarcerated New Yorkers released before or during the pandemic and struggling to find stable employment are ineligible as well, since you need work history to qualify for unemployment. People who work for cash -- street vendors, domestic workers, and other New Yorkers -- who cannot report sufficient earnings or a job are also left out. Excluded workers provide essential services including delivery, cleaning, laundry, construction, warehousing, food preparation and more.

The Assembly, Senate and Governor must deliver long-overdue relief: our communities have received nothing. Our coalition is asking for \$3.5 billion dollars to create a fund that:

- Delivers flat rate monthly cash payments direct to families
- Includes retroactive payments from the onset of COVID unemployment crisis, continuing at least through the end of the state of emergency
- Uses flexible application and proof requirements given the urgency of this crisis

We believe it is time to tax the rich to fund the poor: New York billionaires have grown wealthier during the pandemic, while excluded workers struggle to put food on the table. We wholeheartedly support the Mark to Market tax as one way forward. The Invest in Our New York Act includes 5 other new, progressive recurring revenue raises that can be used to create this fund and support other community needs, such as rent relief, equitable school funding and more. Our priority is bailing out excluded workers: we are counting on you, our elected representatives, to find a way to fund it. Their families’ ability to survive and put food on the table depends on it.

To summarize, I submit this testimony in support of an excluded worker bailout fund, as described in forthcoming legislation from Senator Ramos and Assemblymember de la Rosa. Thank you for your time.

- Aine Chalmers, Brooklyn NY