

**Written Testimony before the
United States Senate, Budget Committee**

**Hearing on
“Millions of Full-time Workers Rely on
Federal Health Care and Food Assistance Programs”**

**Cynthia Murray
United for Respect Leader**

February 25, 2021

Good Morning Chairman Sanders, Ranking Member Graham, and members of the Senate Budget Committee.

My name is Cynthia Murray. I live in Hyattsville, Maryland and I have been a Walmart associate for 20 years. I have asthma, and my son also has underlying health conditions. Like tens of millions of essential workers, I have been working full time since the virus hit, putting my life -- and my son's -- on the line, every day, for less than \$15 an hour. I'm here today as a leader with United for Respect to speak out on behalf of the 1.4 million hourly associates who work for Walmart, the largest private employer in the United States.

The US Senate, the President, and the American people, need to hear from people like me about what is at stake right now, because we are the experts on why raising the federal minimum wage simply cannot wait another day.

Nobody working for the richest family in America should be going hungry. But Senators, at my store, people in the break room at lunch time have nothing to eat for lunch. Walmart paychecks simply can't cover rent, bills, *and* groceries -- so working people sit there hungry, while the Walton family has made over \$50 *billion* since the pandemic began¹ and now have a combined net worth in excess of \$220 billion.² The Waltons pocket \$5.7 million every hour³ while CEO Doug McMillon makes roughly 983 times the median employee pay of \$22,484.⁴ But Mr. McMillon is saying that somehow *at least* \$15 an hour is too much compensation for frontline workers like me? I don't think so.

In 2017 Walmart rewarded shareholders with a \$20 billion handout to buy back their own stock. Had they invested half of that amount in workers, a million Americans could've had a raise of \$5.66 an hour.⁵ In February 2021, they did it again - Walmart's Board of Directors just approved a new \$20 billion share-repurchase program.⁶ As owners of about 50% of outstanding Walmart shares⁷, the Walton heirs benefit personally from these returns to shareholders.

¹ Bloomberg Billionaires Index wealth data for Rob, Jim, Alice, Lukas, Christy, Nancy, and Ann Walton taken on 3/12/20 and 2/22/21.

² Combined net worth of Jim, Rob, Alice, and Lukas Walton as reported in Forbes 2020 List of Billionaires (as of 2/16/21).

³ United for Respect calculation: \$50 billion/8760 (total hours in a year) = \$5.707 million per hour

⁴ <https://sec.report/Document/0001206774-20-001271/> (Form DEF14A Proxy Statement)

⁵ <https://rooseveltinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/RI-Walmart-buyback-brief-201805.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.morningstar.com/news/dow-jones/202102186363/walmart-raises-dividend-approves-20-billion-stock-buyback>

⁷ Walmart DEF 14A Proxy Statement filed with SEC on 4/23/2019

Walmart is the largest corporate employer of women in America, and the largest corporate employer of Black and Brown people in America. According to Walmart's 2020 Environmental Social Governance (ESG) disclosures, 55% of frontline hourly workers are women (770,000) and 45% are people of color (630,000).⁸ Black and Latinx workers are disproportionately concentrated in lower-paying nonmanagerial hourly positions while white workers are concentrated in management and officer level positions.⁹ Walmart has refused to disclose whether employees of color are categorically paid less¹⁰ than white employees or overrepresented in part-time positions.¹¹

Let me tell you about Kendra from the state of Georgia. She is a single mother of two, and she's been at Walmart for four years, currently working as a personal shopper. She currently earns \$11.94 an hour. Kendra must rely on public assistance, Medicaid and SNAP, and on local food pantries to provide for her two young sons. Kendra says, "working for one of the largest corporations in the world, I should not have to choose between paying my bills and feeding my children."

Kellie Ruzich and her husband both work at Walmart in St. Louis County Minnesota to support their three children. Kellie makes \$12.38, and relies on WIC for formula for their baby, but says WIC doesn't provide her enough formula to get through the week. Kellie goes uninsured because she had to choose between the \$85 a month premium, and feeding the baby. She chose her hungry baby.

Mr. McMillion made a big announcement last week that starting wages for the majority of hourly associates will remain \$11 an hour, well below the \$15 an hour competitors like Target, Amazon, BestBuy, and Costco are already paying. More importantly, that starting wage is a starvation wage. It is a wage that requires the federal government foot the bill for feeding Walmart Associates' families, and many of us still go hungry.

At 34 hours a week — Walmart's definition of full-time work — employees earning \$11 an hour would bring home an income that falls below the federal poverty guidelines for a family of three.¹² So it's no surprise to me that Walmart was among the top 4 employers of Medicaid and SNAP recipients across all states surveyed by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) in November 2020.¹³

Mr. McMillion says he supports slow-walking any increase in the federal minimum wage and has been advocating for geographic variation in new minimum wage laws.¹⁴ Walmart says it will raise the wage gradually and the government doesn't have to force their hand, but let me tell you something: the only way they're going to raise our wages is if you make it the law, and it is way past time to do so.

⁸ <https://corporate.walmart.com/esgreport/social#retail-opportunity>

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ <https://www.vox.com/business-and-finance/2018/5/25/17379730/walmart-stock-buyback-worker-wages>

¹¹ <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/coralewis/who-gets-full-time-hours-at-walmart>

¹² <https://aspe.hhs.gov/2020-poverty-guidelines#guidelines> Used 2020 Poverty Guidelines for the 48 Contiguous States and DC for a Household of 3 (\$21,720)

¹³ <https://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-21-45>

¹⁴ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-01-19/walmart-ceo-says-wage-hike-should-consider-regional-economics>

Walmart's failed response to the COVID-19 pandemic underscores how little value Walmart has for the health and livelihood of frontline employees.

Walmart waited two, and in some cases seven weeks, before fully adopting measures recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, such as reducing crowding in stores, cleaning more intensively, and providing protective gear to employees.¹⁵

While Walmart does not publicly report COVID-19 cases or deaths, we know from press and employee reports that thousands of Walmart workers have contracted COVID-19 and at least 22 have died.¹⁶ Numerous outbreaks have been linked to Walmart stores including one in Massachusetts where 81 associates tested positive.¹⁷

Last month, there was a COVID outbreak in my store. We were scared, so we started to organize. I want to personally thank you, Senator Van Hollen, for standing with us workers at the Laurel store. After your inquiry to Walmart, we finally have soap and hot water in the bathrooms and break room, so we can wash our hands during a deadly global pandemic.

Walmart is also the only major national retailer who did not provide hazard pay to frontline employees during the coronavirus crisis. At the peak of the pandemic and in direct acknowledgement of the heightened risk essential workers face, Kroger, Target, Amazon and Costco provided their employees with \$2 hourly premiums. In contrast, Walmart paid out four lump sum cash bonuses - \$300 for full-time and \$150 for part-time employees - between March 1 and December 24, 2020 which combined amounted to a paltry \$0.71 per hour increase for frontline employees.¹⁸

Moreover, Walmart's inflexible and punitive leave policies continue to be in place despite the toll the pandemic has on public-facing essential workers and evidence that paid sick leave could prevent infections and virus spread.¹⁹

In 2019, 350,000 Walmart workers reported failing to use or having no access to paid leave whatsoever.²⁰ The COVID-19 leave policy introduced in March 2020 did not solve the paid leave problem at Walmart with 45% of workers surveyed in May 2020 reporting they are likely to come to work even if they feel sick out of fear of being penalized by management with points, loss of hours, or other disciplinary action.²¹ In addition, Walmart's emergency leave policy does not provide employees additional paid time off to care for family members impacted by coronavirus or to attend to children whose schools are closed, which disproportionately hurts female employees.

Large corporate employers like Walmart were exempt from the provisions of the Families First Coronavirus Response Act requiring employers to provide paid leave for workers ill with COVID-19 or caring for a sick family member. In June 2020, a coalition of 12 state

¹⁵ <https://united4respect.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/2020-Walmarts-Failure-final2.pdf>

¹⁶ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/walmarts-coronavirus-challenge-is-just-staying-open-11587221657> and <https://areyousafe.work>

¹⁷ <https://www.bostonherald.com/2020/05/02/81-coronavirus-cases-at-worcester-walmart-city-says/>

¹⁸ United For Respect internal calculations: FT = \$1,200/42 weeks/40 hours

¹⁹ <https://urbanmilwaukee.com/2021/01/30/paid-sick-leave-has-health-benefits/>

²⁰ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/14/opinion/sunday/coronavirus-paid-sick-leave.html>

²¹ <https://d18m0p25nwr6d.cloudfront.net/CIK-0000104169/dcdb6773-d4b2-49ca-9323-775005deb637.pdf>

attorneys general asked Walmart to adopt a paid sick leave policy that provides the minimum protections required under the Families First Coronavirus Response Act.²²

Working people deserve basic respect. I work hard at my job and I am good at what I do. I'll be 65 in 3 months, and I have no retirement plans. My doctor says I need an MRI for my back injury, but I'm putting it off because on my paycheck, I can't afford the copay for the appointment. People like me are putting off retirement, putting off health care, because people like you have put off raising the minimum wage for 12 years. The time to act is now.

I grew up in Pittsburgh, youngest of four children, raised by my dad and my grandmother. My dad was a Teamster. He had a good job, and a strong union. As a single parent, he was able to support six of us. We weren't wealthy, but we had what we needed. Senators, that is a story from a bygone era. That day in America is gone. Our reality today is that 40 million people are working in poverty, sometimes two and three jobs. We have to stop being a country of billionaires and working poor. You can end that. We can end that. It's time to raise our minimum wage.

APPENDIX I

Kellie Ruzich

Kellie Ruzich from Duluth, MN has worked at Walmart as a Fresh Cap team member in Meats and earns \$12.38 an hour. She is married to another Walmart associate who works on overnights. She is a mother of three children; a 3.5 year-old and twins less than a year-old. She has worked at Walmart for almost three and a half years and has had to rely on public assistance (Medicaid and WIC) since she started, because Walmart's wages are too low. Before her twins were born, her husband was an Hourly Support Manager on Overnights, she made too much at the time to qualify for food assistance, however, he lost his position while they were on FMLA leave following the birth of their twins. Currently Kellie is facing a heating bill of over \$400 dollars. Her last paycheck was about \$750. If she earned \$15 an hour, Kellie says it would change her life. She would be able to pay her bills, support her children, and put money away to save for an emergency. She could pay her bills on time and not have to go into debt, borrowing money from her next paycheck in order to pay her gas and electric bills. \$15 an hour would mean she would not need to rely on government assistance and could spend more time with her kids.

APPENDIX II

Brief by Brookings Institution, December 2020

[Amazon and Walmart have raked in billions in additional profits during the pandemic, and shared almost none of it with their workers.](#)

UC Berkeley blog post, December 2020

[The U.S. wealth gap was appalling before the pandemic. Now, it's worse](#)

Report by Institute for Policy Studies, November 2020

[Billionaire Wealth vs. Community Health](#)

Op-Ed by Walmart Associate Cynthia Murray, October 2020

[Walmart wants to hear workers' voices, it should give us a seat at the table](#)

Op-Ed by Walmart Associate Cat Davis in NBC Think, June 2020

[Walmart Exploits Black Lives](#)

New York Magazine article, May 2020

[Walmart Workers Are Dying From the Coronavirus. Now They Want a Seat at the Table](#)

Report by The Center for Popular Democracy & United for Respect, May 2020

[Walmart's Failure to Prioritize Employee and Public Health](#)

Op-Ed by Walmart Associate Melissa Love in The NY Times, March 2020

[At Walmart, the Coronavirus Makes It Feel Like Black Friday](#)

Report by United for Respect, 2018

[Trapped in Part-Time: Walmart's Phantom Ladder of Opportunity](#)

Report by A Better Balance, 2017

[How Walmart Unlawfully Punishes Workers for Medical Absences](#)