

Terrence Wise, Testimony

U.S Senate Budget Committee Hearing, Should Taxpayers Subsidize Poverty Wages at Large Profitable Corporations?

February 25th, 2021

Chairman Sanders, Ranking Member Graham, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify. My name is Terrence Wise. I'm a 41-year old, second generation fast-food worker from Kansas City, Missouri. I am honored to speak with you on the issue of taxpayers subsidizing poverty wages of large, profitable corporations--corporations like the one I work for, McDonald's.

I began fighting for \$15 and a Union in 2013. I felt the struggle of raising a family on low wages my whole life. It all began in South Carolina. I grew up in government housing with my two brothers and a sister. My mother worked full time at Hardee's for 30 years. My dad also served in the military as a cook.

My mom would wake me up at 4am when she left for Hardee's. I had to get my siblings off to school. It was also my job to get the mail and sign for food stamps from the postman. Even with two full-time incomes and food stamps our family had to skip meals. One winter I didn't even have a coat until my guidance counselor gave me one from the lost and found. Hardworking people with two full-time incomes shouldn't live like this, in the richest nation on earth.

I was a great student and by the eighth grade was in advanced placement classes. My teachers said, "Terrence you're going to do great things. You can be anything." I wanted to be a Gamecock at the University of South Carolina. I was going to be a writer.

But I went to work at age 16 to try to help my family survive. One day I came home from school, there were no lights or food in the fridge and I couldn't do homework without food and lights.

So I went and got my first job at Taco Bell. I only made \$4.25 an hour, but I knew my family needed the money -- desperately. My first paycheck was \$150. It went to the light bill. One job wasn't enough. So I got a second job at Wendy's to bring in more money for my family.

I tried to balance both work and school. I had As in AP history, English, Science, and Math. I started falling asleep in class. My teachers asked, "Terrence, what's wrong?" I told them I was working two jobs.

I didn't need my AP Calculus to run the numbers at home. There simply wasn't enough money for basic necessities. I had to leave school and my dream of college behind. At 17, I became a full-time worker.

I've been working in fast food ever since.

Now, I have a family of my own. My fiancée is a home health care provider and we have three daughters--ages 18, 17, and 15. She takes care of some of the most vulnerable people in our society. Neither of us make enough money to make ends meet.

My family has been homeless despite two incomes. We've endured freezing temperatures in our purple minivan. I'd see my daughters' eyes wide open, tossing and turning, in the back seat. Try waking up in the morning and getting ready for work and school in a parking lot with your family of five. That's something a parent can never forget and a memory you can never take away from your children. You should never have multiple jobs in the United States and nowhere to sleep.

And that was before the pandemic. Since COVID-19 hit, it's gotten even harder. In March, my hours were cut from 40 to 28. Some of my co-workers were laid off entirely. My family and I got evicted and we had to move in with relatives. We had 11 people in a 3-bedroom, one bathroom house.

During lockdowns, McDonald's gave me a piece of paper to show the police in case I got pulled over on my way to work that said that I am an "essential employee." But I can tell you, they treat us more like second-class citizens than "essential workers."

I work for McDonald's, the second largest corporation in America and still rely on food stamps and Medicaid. I don't receive as much as I did when I made \$8 or \$9 an hour, but still need help even though I work my tail off.

I want to stand on my own. I want to provide my girls with three meals a day and give them the opportunities I didn't have. I don't want to go to the supermarket with my kids and have to take out my benefit card to buy food. My paycheck should be able to handle that.

This is what generational poverty in America looks like. It's what our movement is fighting to end. It's why I joined the Fight for \$15 and a Union seven years ago. I'm fighting to ensure my mother's past and my present is not my daughters' future.

The Fight for \$15 and a Union has changed my life. My daughters march on the front lines with me during strikes. They understand what it means to fight for justice.

This movement has also changed our city, state and country. Many people didn't believe that \$15 was possible. But a path to \$15 an hour has become a reality for 42% of the U.S. workforce.

Nearly 70% of voters in Kansas City voted for a \$15 minimum wage in 2017. It was a huge victory for us until the state legislature blocked the increase. Missouri voters raised the minimum wage in 2018 but, just this week, legislators launched an effort to stop that increase in its tracks.

That's just one reason we need Congress to take action immediately to raise the federal minimum wage. Everyone who wakes up and works in our country deserves access to the promise that America made to each and every one of us: "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

It's a promise that, to this day, remains unfulfilled for too many of us.

Thank you and I look forward to your questions.