

Written Testimony of

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Thank you, Subcommittee Chair Allen, Subcommittee Ranking Member DeSaulnier, and Members of the Subcommittee. I am honored to join you today to share some of my research on labor unions. I am an associate professor in the Department of Political Science at George Washington University, where I have taught since 2017. I have researched labor unions for fifteen years and have published two peer-reviewed books and fifteen academic articles.¹ Today, I hope to explain how labor unions not only provide benefits for the workers that they represent, but also protect the broader working class, our nation's public health, and our democracy.

I would like to start small with the benefits of unions for union members, and then gradually zoom out to discuss how unions provide broader benefits for society at large.

First, labor unions make sure that the workers they represent share in the benefits of economic growth. Although economic theory predicts that workers' wages will automatically rise with productivity, in the real world we see wage growth lagging far behind productivity growth.² As Adam Smith explained, this happens because workers have far less bargaining power than their employers, who can hold out in wage negotiations much longer than workers can.³ My research shows that unions can help solve this problem. I examined workers in 28 industries across 117 countries and found that wages are more likely to rise along with productivity when workers have strong unions and well-protected labor rights.⁴ Related research finds that labor rights and unions are associated with lower levels of income inequality in countries around the world, including here in the United States.⁵

Second, labor unions often fight for policies that protect non-union workers, too. One recent example comes from California, where the United Farm Workers helped to win the nation's first state-level outdoor heat standard.⁶ California's law grants outdoor workers the rights to water, rest, and shade on hot days. My research compared deaths in California to neighboring states without heat standards and found that California's law was associated with a 33-51% reduction in heat-related deaths among outdoor workers.⁷ These benefits extend to all outdoor workers in California, not just the 2% of agricultural workers represented by the United Farm Workers.⁸ The AFL-CIO and unions such as AFSCME, United Steelworkers, and the Teamsters are currently fighting for the extension of such heat protections across the United States, which

¹ Dean, A. 2016. *From Conflict to Coalition: Profit-Sharing Institutions and the Political Economy of Trade*. Cambridge University Press; Dean, A. 2022. *Opening Up By Cracking Down: Labor Repression and Trade Liberalization in Democratic Developing Countries*. Cambridge University Press.

² Mishel, L. and Bivens, J., 2021. Identifying the policy levers generating wage suppression and wage inequality. *Economic Policy Institute*, May 13.

³ Smith, A. 1776/2012. *The Wealth of Nations*. Wordsworth Editions. Book I, Chapter 8.

⁴ Dean, A., 2015. Power over profits: The political economy of workers and wages. *Politics & Society*, 43(3), pp.333-360.

⁵ Kerrissey, J., 2015. Collective labor rights and income inequality. *American Sociological Review*, 80(3), pp.626-653; Farber, H.S., Herbst, D., Kuziemko, I. and Naidu, S., 2021. Unions and inequality over the twentieth century: New evidence from survey data. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 136(3), pp.1325-1385.

⁶ Salladay, R. and Vogel, N. 2005. Gov. Orders Shade, Water for Workers Sickened by Heat, *Los Angeles Times*, August 3.

⁷ Dean, A. and McCallum, J.K., 2025. California's Heat Standard And Heat-Related Deaths Among Outdoor Workers. *Health Affairs*, 44(12), pp.1490-1496.

⁸ Lee, K. and Michelena, L. 2023. Can the United Farm Workers Rise Again? *New York Times*, March 11.

my research suggests would save between 1,000 and 1,500 lives each year.⁹ Moreover, my research finds that these simple, life-saving heat protections were inexpensive and had no negative economic impact on California's agriculture and construction industries.¹⁰

Third, labor unions often fight for policies that improve public health for everyone. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, unionized nursing homes were safer places for elderly residents as well as workers. My research found that unionized nursing homes in New York had 30% lower mortality rates during the first months of the pandemic.¹¹ Why? Because unions fought for personal protective equipment and infection control policies that protected workers and lowered transmission between residents and nursing home workers; around the United States, unionized nursing homes had 7% lower worker infection rates.¹² As unionized healthcare workers often said during the pandemic - "if we get sick, you get sick."¹³

Last, I'd like to share some results from a new book I am writing about today's crises of economic inequality and democratic erosion.¹⁴ I've studied every democratic transition over the past 75 years to better understand why some democracies have survived longer than others. What I found is that labor unions and the protection of labor rights are crucial. In short, there are two common trajectories that democracies have followed. In some cases, labor unions helped to lead their country's original struggle for democracy. When they did so, the transition to democracy was quickly followed by improved labor rights in new constitutions and legislation. Those labor rights led to stronger unions, higher levels of income equality, and a lower probability of a democratic collapse back into authoritarianism. Where unions did not help to lead the struggle for democracy - often because repression left them too weak to do so - the transition to democracy completely failed to increase labor rights. Continuing the labor repression from the past, these countries went on to have weaker unions, higher levels of income inequality, and a much higher chance of democratic collapse. In short, labor rights and strong labor unions are at the heart of economic equality and sustainable democracy around the world.

Given the broad benefits that labor unions provide, it is no surprise that 71% of Americans now approve of labor unions.¹⁵ A recent poll found that support for unions is even higher among Americans younger than 30 years old - 88% of whom view unions favorably.¹⁶ And many

⁹ Dean, A. and McCallum, J.K. 2026. Extreme Heat is Killing America's Workers. Groundwork Collaborative.

¹⁰ Dean, A. and McCallum, J.K. 2026. California's Heat Standard Did Not Harm Construction and Agriculture. *Center for Labor and a Just Economy*, working paper.

¹¹ Dean, A., Venkataramani, A. and Kimmel, S.D., 2020. Mortality rates from COVID-19 are lower in unionized nursing homes. *Health Affairs*, 39(11), pp.1993-2001.

¹² Dean, A., McCallum, J.K., Kimmel, S.D. and Venkataramani, A.S., 2022. Resident Mortality And Worker Infection Rates From COVID-19 Lower In Union Than Nonunion US Nursing Homes, 2020-21. *Health Affairs*, 41(5), pp.751-759.

¹³ Goulding S.C., 2020. Caregivers demand PPE and better pay in protest in Kindred Hospital Westminster. *Orange County Register*, July 22, 2020.

¹⁴ Dean, A. *No Struggle, No Progress: Labor's Fight for Political and Economic Democracy*. Manuscript in progress.

¹⁵ Saad, L. 2026. Record-High 47% Want Unions to Have More Influence. *Gallup News*. September 1, 2026.

¹⁶ The State of Labor Unions Polling, GBAO. August 25, 2023.

workers who are not currently union members would like to join a union; a 2023 survey found that 43% of employed, nonunion workers would vote to join a union if given the opportunity.¹⁷

Despite such high levels of public support for unions, only 6% of American workers in the private sector are currently members of a union.¹⁸ What explains this large gap? According to Columbia University law professor Kate Andrias, the problem is that American labor law is failing to protect workers' right to join a union: "weak enforcement mechanisms, slight penalties, and lengthy delays - all of which are routinely exploited by employers resisting unionization - fail to protect workers' ability to organize and bargain collectively with their employers."¹⁹ Legislation such as the Protecting the Right to Organize (PRO) Act would increase penalties for employers that violate labor law and thereby increase the ability of workers to organize and join unions.²⁰

Thank you for the opportunity to share my expertise with the subcommittee. I'll be happy to answer any questions.

¹⁷ Ahlquist, J., Grumbach, J. and Kochan, T., 2024. The rise of the union curious. *Economic Policy Institute*.

¹⁸ Bauer, L. and Cole, T. 2026. Six facts about union density in the United States. *Brookings*.

¹⁹ Andrias, K., 2016. The new labor law. *Yale LJ*, 126, p.2.

²⁰ Levin, A. and Puckett, C., 2022. Labor law reform at a critical juncture: The case for the Protecting the Right to Organize Act. *Harv. J. on Legis.*, 59, p.1.