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Subcommittee on Workforce Protections
U.S. House of Representatives

"Less Red Tape, More Opportunity; Unleashing American Workers and Job Creators"
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Chairman Mackenzie, Ranking Member Omar and members of the subcommittee, I appreciate the opportunity to testify on behalf of the AFL-CIO about protecting worker health and safety.

The AFL-CIO is the federation of 65 national labor unions in the U.S., representing 15 million working people across a wide variety of industries—including construction, education, emergency response, manufacturing, health care, transportation, utilities, retail and service, entertainment, athletics, and others—in private and public sectors and in stationary and mobile workplaces. Our members and millions of other workers across the country face life-altering working conditions every day they show up to work.

"Deregulatory" Deception

The use of "deregulation" and "less red tape" as a public frame for the Trump administration's regulatory agenda is a bait and switch—not actually about fewer rules to promote growth and innovation, but intended to distract from shifting costs and rigging the economy for the rich and powerful at the expense of everyone else, regardless of the number of rules.[1] These are efforts to eliminate regulations that have been grounded in science and real-world evidence, based on public and expert input from all corners and have been effective and achievable for decades. These efforts focus on job creation and productivity to remove employers' responsibilities to maintain a safe and fair workplace, which harms worker health, economic security and wellbeing.

The "deregulatory" and "red tape" labels focus on the costs borne by industry due to the government, obscuring the more important power dynamic of the costs borne by working people and consumers due to industry practices that are avoidable.[2] In this way, the deregulatory

[1] Coalition for Sensible Safeguards. *Avoiding the Deregulatory Trap: It's not about fewer rules. It's about rigging the system for the wealthy and powerful.* April 20, 2026. Available at: sensiblesafeguards.org/wp-content/uploads/Myth-of-Deregulation-Report.pdf.
[2] Ibid.

narrative on costs to industry neglects the critical benefits of the regulation's impacts on working people and the costs to working people in the absence of the regulation.

Regulation spurs innovation. Lookback reviews of Occupational Safety and Health (OSHA) regulation, for instance, show that safety and health standards forced innovative industry technologies and practices that also resulted in more cost-effective compliance for businesses—and these regulations saved hundreds to thousands of workers from dying and becoming seriously injured on the job.[3]

"Deregulatory" efforts are also giving more power to large corporations under the guise of small business flexibility. So, cutting red tape in the name of small business is deceiving as it is actually large corporations that are increasingly benefiting. For years, multi-million and multi-billion-dollar corporations have routinely captured federal contracts set aside for small businesses. The Government Accountability Office, the U.S. Small Business Administration's (SBA) Office of Inspector General, the Center for Progressive Reform and other organizations have repeatedly highlighted significant gaps in the SBA oversight of its lending and contracting programs. Because of these weak controls, large corporations, foreign-owned entities, and ineligible firms have successfully accessed billions of dollars in federal funding and set-aside contracts originally intended exclusively for independent operators and small businesses.

A new proposal by the Trump administration aims to permit billion-dollar businesses to qualify as 'small' businesses.[4] This move could give large corporations access to government contracts, loans and other assistance that is set aside for small businesses, which could create more competition for contracts and result in fewer opportunities for subcontracts by actual small businesses. Wrongly classifying large corporations as small businesses could result in serious regulatory consequences that were once limited to small businesses, such as creating additional regulatory burdens on agencies and allowing large corporations to preview regulations before they are proposed.

Larger employers are now also benefiting from size-based and quick-fix penalty reductions when they violate the law and are issued OSHA citations—a discount that used to only be available to small employers. This change was due to a policy change by the Trump administration in July 2025.[5]

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[3] *See* OSHA.gov/laws-regs/lookback.
[4] *See* FederalRegister.gov/documents/2026/08/20/2026-17042/small-business-size-standards.
[5] See OSHA.gov/news/newsreleases/osha-national-news-release/20250714.

Unions support strong regulatory systems because they save lives, spur innovation, increase economic fairness, uphold democracy and create a pathway for social progress—leveling the playing field so that the economy grows equitably. Dismantling regulations and undermining these systems unleashes a cascade of uncontrollable problems.

Attacks on Working People Cost Lives and Cost Taxpayers

Work is definitively a social determinant of health. The underlying causes of injuries and illnesses that businesses fail to prevent in the workplace create health and economic pressures on workers and consumers, and their families and communities. People spend most of their time working and the work environment directly shapes physical, mental, and economic wellbeing across a person's life. Physical and psychosocial hazards at work dictate how people are able to spend their free time, and work-related chronic health conditions place a physical and financial strain on individuals and their families. Family members often must stop working to become caretakers instead of contributors to the local and global economy.

Work is a significant source and cost of the burden of disease. Globally, 2.9 million deaths—2.6 million from disease alone—and 180 million disability-adjusted life years (DALYs) are attributable to work.[6] This burden has increased 25-45% in the last five years alone and represents an economic loss equal to nearly 6% of global GDP from occupational cancers, respiratory and skin diseases and others; psychosocial factors are increasing this loss. In high-income and American regions, work-related malignant neoplasms (cancers) and long-latency illnesses constitute the largest share of fatal work-related health outcomes.

The impact on the workforce, our communities and systems is enormous. Social protection systems such as workers compensation benefits cover only a fraction—in some estimates, one-fifth—of the actual costs of a workplace injury or illness, including lost wages, medical expenses and rehabilitation. The shifting burden onto social security, disability, health care and other systems cannot fully compensate or make workers whole.[7]

Regulatory systems prevent disease by raising the floor for businesses that cut corners to make labor cheaper, faster and more disposable. Yet, occupational health protections and workers' rights are a primary target of a new wave of deregulatory efforts.

Since July 2025, the Department of Labor has published more than 60 "deregulatory" proposals that seek to weaken protections for people at work through standards and regulations. These

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[6] Hämäläinen, P., Takala, J., Nygård, C. H., & Neupane, S. (2024). Global-, regional- and country-level estimates of the work-related burden of diseases and accidents in 2019. Scandinavian Journal of Work, Environment & Health, 50(1), 48–52.

[7] *See* publicintegrity.org/inequality-poverty-opportunity/workers-rights/workplace-injury-illness-costs-being-foisted-on-workers-government-oshas-michaels-says/.

changes do not fix duplicative, redundant, or outdated standards, but will increase worker injuries, illnesses and fatalities that will shift the burden onto taxpayers. Below are several key examples.

Eliminating worker safety protections for "obvious" hazards and "inherently risky" occupations:
The Trump administration has issued proposed rules that would remove employees from OSHA protections altogether if they hold "inherently risky" occupations or work with "obvious" hazards. In its establishment of OSHA in 1970, Congress assigned OSHA the authority to enforce specific standards and its general duty clause to ensure employers maintain a safe workplace. Congress specifically gave OSHA the "general duty clause" to ensure that employers could not ignore a hazard just because it did not have a dedicated standard. If these are finalized, workers would not be protected by the government when their employer does not address preventable dangers on the job.

Weakening respirator requirements that protect against chemicals and infectious diseases:
Another proposal would eliminate mandatory medical evaluations for workers when they are required to respirators for a job, and 16 other proposals would weaken respirator-related requirements on employers to give them more discretion about which workers need to wear respirators, weaken training requirements, weaken HEPA/filter requirements and/or weaken medical evaluation requirements. These proposals dismiss science, industrial hygiene expertise, medical advice and evidence from the shop floor. Respirators can pose serious health risks if they are used without properly ensuring that workers can safely wear them while performing their job. Relaxing requirements for specific kinds of respirators, even against chemicals such as asbestos and lead, puts workers in danger of significant disease and death.

Construction, manufacturing and public sector workers:
Another proposal would rescind an existing standard that requires adequate lighting in construction areas, aisles, stairs, ramps, runways, corridors, offices, shops, and storage areas. Another would rescind employer requirements to use the longstanding color scheme to mark physical hazards in the workplace: red for danger and stop, and yellow for caution. Another proposes to eliminate the deadline indefinitely for employers to modernize ladder safety and personal fall arrest systems by 2036, a deadline they have already had a full decade to meet in order to protect their workers from preventable, fatal fall hazards.

A miner's right to breathe is more important than a corporation's profit margin:
The White House recently cleared a new proposal to roll back silica protections for miners, at the same time research shows that one third of all underground coal miners in central Appalachia suffer from incurable Black Lung disease—a 50 year high. Our government is rolling back silica protections for mineworkers and prioritizing efforts to shield manufacturers of dangerous engineered stone products from liability, rather than protect the workers harmed by them.

The Mine Safety and Health Administration has also proposed to remove the requirement for agency approval of mine operator safety plans before companies send workers underground to begin work.

Other protections at work:
Deregulatory efforts at other agencies that target worker health and safety are increasing line speeds in poultry and pork processing plants that cause severe injuries, weakening of rules that prevent chemical plant explosions and worker input into safety plans, weakening safety protections for workers at U.S. Department of Energy sites, eliminating industry requirements that minimize radiation exposure across industries and undermining expert support for developing worker safety standards by decimating the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health.

Other deregulatory efforts from the Department of Labor are removing domestic workers from minimum wage and overtime laws, weakening child labor standards, creating steep financial barriers for immigrant workers to be legally employed, making it easier to misclassify workers under employment schemes and targeting labor unions.

Ultimately, initiatives aimed at "deregulation" and "cutting red tape" are too simplistic and are dangerous. They fail to account for the original reasons those rules were established; fail to justify changes with evidence or ignore data outright; increase risk to workers and liability for employers; create exercises that are costly for taxpayers; and perform duplicative work already completed by agencies years ago.

More Worker Protections are Needed, Not Fewer

July 2026 was the hottest month ever recorded in the contiguous United States.[8] More than 2,600 workers died from heat exposure in the past five years alone.[9] Construction and manufacturing workers, teachers, letter carriers and other workers who are building, operating and repairing our schools, hospitals, and VA facilities, and delivering our mail and preparing our food, are doing it in the hottest conditions ever recorded. Yet, the Trump administration has refused to act on a comprehensive heat standard that would have guaranteed workers basic water, shade, and rest breaks from their employers; instead, they have weakened OSHA's existing heat enforcement program and have announced plans for a potential heat standard that would give employers more flexibility.

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[8] *See* NCEI.NOAA.gov/news/national-climate-202607.
[9] AFL-CIO. *Death on the Job: The Toll of Neglect.* April 27, 2026. AFLCIO.org/dotj-2026.

Under the Trump administration, the weakening of standards and laws has been coupled with rhetoric centered on the need for more employer assistance, rather than enforcement with citations and rather than making the agency more accessible to workers. OSHA has many tools, including compliance assistance for employers, but deterrence is a critical tool for employers who may want to cut corners that result in workers paying the price. The promulgation and enforcement of strong standards have always been cornerstones of the Occupational Safety and Health Act and the Mine Safety and Health Act.

Resource capacity for these agencies has severely declined and were particularly slashed last year. Over the past 35 years, the number of OSHA staff have decreased 26%, number of inspectors per workers decreased 71%, the agency budget decreased 10% and the amount OSHA has to protect the health and safety of each worker it is responsible for decreased 41%.[10] When there are fewer resources, the solution is not to weaken the laws, but to find better ways to enforce and remind employers of the law so that deterrence covers more ground.

Even as a small agency with massive responsibility, OSHA has been tremendously effective since its inception 55 years ago. Workplace deaths have decreased dramatically while the workforce has grown 44% and the number of establishments covered by the agency has increased 85%.[11] A substantial body of empirical evidence has found that OSHA inspections with penalties result in substantially and persistently reduced rates of serious injuries.[12,13] That effectiveness has not changed. Compared with the previous two years, in FY 2024, federal OSHA had 13% fewer worker fatalities to investigate—notably 20% fewer from falls and nearly 70% fewer from trench collapses—due to targeted enforcement programs.[14]

Just because a business is small in employment size doesn't mean that it is safe. Small businesses can be very dangerous workplaces. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the highest workplace fatality rates (per 100,000 workers) occur in industries that have a high proportion of small establishments, including construction (9.2), mining (13.8), transportation (12.2) and agriculture (20.9).[15] Small businesses also have resources to assist them in complying with the law and are provided “discounts” when they violate the law. For example, OSHA’s onsite consultation program has been free to small businesses for years; it is separate from enforcement and carried out by the states under a federal OSHA grant program. Also, OSHA has historically provided a 70% penalty reduction for small employers (10 employees or fewer) and 60% penalty

[10] AFL-CIO. *Death on the Job: The Toll of Neglect.* April 27, 2026. AFLCIO.org/dotj-2026.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Levine, D. I., Toffel, M. W., & Johnson, M. S. (2012). Randomized government safety inspections reduce worker injuries with no detectable job loss. *Science*, 336(6083), 907-911.
[13] Mendeloff, J. (2012). A new estimate of the impact of OSHA inspections on manufacturing injuries. *American Journal of Industrial Medicine*, 55(11), 1034–1043.
[14] *See* DOL.gov/newsroom/releases/osha/osha20241104-0.
[15] *See* BLS.gov/news.release/pdf/cfoi.pdf and AFL-CIO. *Death on the Job: The Toll of Neglect.* April 27, 2026. AFLCIO.org/dotj-2026.

reduction for medium sized employers (11 to 25 employees). Due to a revised policy by the Trump administration in July 2025, that number increased to 70% for all employers with 25 or fewer employees and 30% for all employers with 26 to 100 employees.[16]

We all want safe workplaces. Regulation is the cost of doing business; working people's lives must not be. I urge the subcommittee and the Congress to ensure agencies promulgate strong regulations and implement and oversee strong enforcement programs so that workers have the opportunity to return to their families unharmed at the end of their shift and are paid and treated fairly for the labor they provide, so that bad actors are held accountable when they do not meet strong minimum standards and do not undercut scrupulous employers. Workers should not have to sacrifice their lives for a paycheck.

[16] *See* OSHA.gov/news/newsreleases/osha-national-news-release/20250714.