

Testimony of Deborah Axt, Co-Executive Director, Make the Road New York  
before the Joint Hearing of the NYS Senate and NYS Assembly  
on the Impact of COVID-19 on the Workforce  
August 13, 2020

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Thank you for allowing me to testify on behalf of Make the Road New York's 25,000 members - black and brown community members living in many of the earliest, epicenter communities in this pandemic. Queens, the rest of New York City, Long Island and hard hit communities in Westchester.

Our members are predominantly Black and Latinx and a huge portion work in essential jobs - cleaning hospitals and homes, delivering food and supplies, staffing Amazon warehouses, bodegas and grocery stores, and providing healthcare to families trying to survive COVID-19. But our members have learned that in this moment although their work is needed more than ever, their lives are also seen as disposable.

At work, the absolute lack of clear, mandated safeguards leaves workers rigging up their own safety protection. Workers who dare speak up and ask for space and time to sanitize have repeatedly been harassed and even fired to silence them - some by the most powerful corporation on earth, Amazon.

The NYS expanded paid sick days law has been meaningless and inapplicable to virtually all of our members.

Meanwhile the Department of Labor has for all practical purposes stopped even trying to enforce the labor protections that do exist. Workers facing wage theft, now more than ever, just have to accept it. There is no one to turn to and no hope of finding another job.

But the worst and most disgusting treatment our members are facing is the fact that when they lose their job, or when the family breadwinner dies of COVID or becomes too sick to work, our state has left unconscionable numbers of them without a single penny of income replacement relief. This is because, under this country's racist immigration laws, workers without work authorization often pay into our Unemployment Insurance system but are completely barred from accessing benefits if a crisis hits and they need a cushion. Suffice it to say, crisis has hit.

**In May Make the Road New York released a report - [Excluded in the Epicenter](#) - based on a study we conducted of over 230 Black and Brown immigrant New Yorkers. And our [follow up report](#), released earlier this week is the first of its kind study to provide a look at the unfolding pandemic in Black and Brown immigrant communities.**

**The results are horrifying:**

- Initially 92% reported that either they or another earner in their household has lost their job or income as a result of the crisis. 84% themselves were unemployed as of May.
- At that time, only 5% had received unemployment benefits.
- As of the end of July, 74% of those who were unemployed in May continued to be without work. 65% also had an additional adult in the household who was unemployed due to COVID.
- 98% of the undocumented immigrant unemployed had not received a single penny in federal or state economic assistance.

Other data reinforces the results of our report, especially as to the crisis facing immigrant communities. The **Fiscal Policy Institute finds that *most New York City residents employed in essential jobs are immigrants — 54 percent*** of the total. Immigrant workers also predominate in jobs decimated by the crisis. According to [James Parrott of the New School Center for NYC Affairs](#), **nearly one in six New York City jobs lost due to the pandemic was held by an undocumented worker.**

But no matter how many hours they have clocked doing essential work so that others can stay home, nor how hard hit by job displacement **now, undocumented workers cannot get a single penny from the Unemployment Insurance System or the Pandemic Unemployment Assistance program. Many** are not even eligible for Food Stamps.

And then there are those who were recently incarcerated in prisons, jails or immigrant detention centers but have been released - into the pandemic that makes finding a job impossible.

**When our undocumented and recently incarcerated brothers and sisters lose their jobs or their lives, how exactly do we expect them and their families to stay home and maintain social distance?** The need to work at any and all cost is overwhelming. But there aren't even enough exploitative, dangerous jobs to go around.

**No \$1200 check is coming. No matter how long they stay on hold with the Department of Labor, no Unemployment check is coming.**

Congress should act to include our members. But we all know that they will not. Not a single remotely viable proposal is Luce in Congress that would make Excluded Workers eligible for UI or PÚA or any other replacement income.

Didn't some foundations jump into action? Yes, and we are incredibly grateful. Private donors and foundations have enabled our organization alone to distribute over \$3million in direct aid. Does that sound like a lot? It isn't. That is enough for a small percentage of suffering families to get a one time donation of a few hundred dollars. Not nearly enough to pay the mounting debts and back rent. And the burden on Community Based Organizations to distribute even those levels of funding was overwhelming. The same stories are coming from California. An overburdened nonprofit infrastructure and one time donations to families in amounts nowhere near sufficient to live on.

**Albany must take immediate action** to protect immigrants and Black and Brown New Yorkers - the very people most likely to be working essential jobs or to have been left unemployed by this crisis.

#### **PROVIDE IMMEDIATE RELIEF TO EXCLUDED WORKERS**

**Undocumented workers, very small immigrant-owned businesses, and immigrant families who have lost a breadwinner to Coronavirus are left without relief**, despite having paid more than their fair share of taxes, and bearing the brunt of the pandemic. **This forces sick people to venture out to work or search for work, putting everyone at risk.**

**We must create a \$3.5 billion Excluded Workers emergency fund, to provide emergency income replacement for excluded workers and immigrants who have lost the family breadwinner to COVID.**

- **Begin immediate weekly or monthly benefits pegged to the amount that a typical low wage worker is eligible to receive in Unemployment Insurance** - about \$750 per week - through the end of the crisis.
- **Proof of loss of income must be flexible and include self attestation** to allow those in the informal economy to access relief.
- **The Mark to Market Tax and Worker Bailout would address this need (Senator Jessica Ramos S8277A | Assembly Member Carmen de la Rosa A10414).**

We cannot afford to allow this economic and health devastation continue in the epicenter communities of our state. And survival for our people will also equal stimulus for our economy.

- **It is also worth recognizing, [per The Fiscal Policy Institute](#), that over \$1.4 Billion have been deposited into the unemployment insurance system on behalf of undocumented New York workers** in recent years.
- The **Mark-to-Market Billionaire Wealth Tax** that Ramos and De La Rosa propose would provide over \$5.5 billion this year, [according to the Fiscal Policy Institute](#).

Thank you for your commitment to the communities hardest hit by this pandemic. We look forward to working with you to meet these critical needs.