

**Workers United NY-NJ Joint Board & The New York Nail Salon Workers Association
Testimony for NY Legislature Joint Public Hearing: Impact of COVID-19 on the
Workforce
August 26, 2020**

Committee chairs and members of the committees - thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony regarding COVID-19's impact on the workforce. I am writing from the New York Nail Salon Workers Association (NYNSWA), which is part of the NY NJ Regional Joint Board of Workers United. Prior to the pandemic, there were over 40,000 nail salon workers in New York State, most of whom are immigrant women of color. On March 20, Governor Cuomo ordered all nail salons in New York to close, a decision to protect public health which had the side effect of creating an unmitigated economic crisis for the workforce.

Many nail salon workers were already in a very precarious financial situation - living not paycheck to paycheck but day to day. Our February 2020 [report](#) found that more than 80 percent of workers experience wage theft at an average of over \$9,400 per year. Additionally, most NYNSWA members live in the areas of Queens and the Bronx that were hit hardest by the pandemic. We heard from many workers that they themselves or members of their family contracted the virus, and tragically heard that some passed away.

While many salons have shuttered for good, those that began to re-open present their employees with a difficult choice – between protecting their health and that of their loved ones, and keeping a roof over their heads. Our members have largely been excluded from all government relief during the COVID shutdown due to immigration status, forcing them to forgo paying rent, bills and other necessities.

After more than five months into the pandemic, NYNSWA members have amassed an incredible amount of debt, particularly in back-rent that they now owe. Many have gone on rent strike out of necessity. We recently surveyed over 500 NYNSWA members and found that half have not returned to work. The most common reasons for not returning to work were that they were not called back (either because the salon did not reopen or it reopened with a smaller workforce), they do not have childcare, and they do not feel safe returning to work. Working in this industry was already a dangerous job before the pandemic, as many workers were exposed to toxic chemicals without being provided with proper PPE.

Our survey found that workers still have a reason to be worried about their health. Over 90 percent of those surveyed said that their employer does not provide paid sick days. This includes 86 percent of workers in salons that should legally be covered by New York City's paid sick days law. Despite New York's low COVID-19 numbers, nine percent of surveyed workers said that they have gotten the virus since returning to work. The survey also revealed that not all salons are complying with the NY Forward health and safety guidelines for nail salons: 28% of workers said that their employer does not always provide a new mask every day and 21% said

that their employer does not always provide new gloves for each client. About one third of workers said that they did not receive any training prior to returning to work on the new COVID regulations.

The economic crisis continues to hit this workforce hard, and not only for those who have been unable to return to work. More than 70 percent of workers said that they are working less days now and 54 percent said that they have seen a decrease in their pay, despite an [increase](#) in the subminimum wage that went into effect at the end of June. It has become increasingly clear that this economic crisis has not impacted all New Yorkers equally. The wealthiest New Yorkers have made incredible profits during this pandemic. A [recent analysis](#) by Americans for Tax Fairness found that New York's 118 billionaires saw a \$77.3 billion increase in their net worth from March to June, the first three months of the pandemic.

Our state should not continue to allow this pandemic to exacerbate inequalities. We believe that there are two important pieces of legislation before you that will help address both the health and economic impacts of the pandemic. The first is the [NY Heros Act](#), which would require businesses to have enforceable safety standards to prevent further spread of the virus and includes retaliation protections for workers. The second is S8277/A10414, which would impose a new form of capital gains tax on New York's billionaires. This tax would bring in \$5.5 billion this year to provide funds to create emergency income, including retroactive payments, for excluded New Yorkers. A [new analysis](#) by the Fiscal Policy Institute (FPI) found that the bill would not only impact excluded workers and their families, but would also provide a much-needed economic boost for local economies statewide.

We are deeply concerned that without these legislative actions, the situation for our workforce and many other workers throughout the state will become increasingly dire. We know that the economic and health implications of this virus are far from over, and we encourage the legislature to act now on both of these bills. Thank you.