

**Statement by**

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**Testimony before the House Financial Services Committee  
Subcommittee on Investor Protection, Entrepreneurship and Capital Markets**

**Hearing on  
“Examining Corporate Priorities: The Impact of Stock Buybacks on Workers,  
Communities, and Investors”**

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Thank you Chairwoman Maloney and Congresswoman Waters for inviting me to speak today. I'm honored to be here. My name is Janie Grice and I'm from Marion, SC. I worked at Walmart as a cashier and later, as a customer service manager while I was raising my son as a single mother. I'm here today as a leader with United for Respect to speak on behalf of the 1.4 million associates who work for Walmart.

Most of you don't know Marion, SC. We're a small town in the American South that many have forgotten. When our first Walmart came to town, everyone was so excited. We had lost so many jobs when manufacturing factories shut down and moved overseas. Finally, we had jobs that paid well and where management treated you well. People used to love working at Walmart and shopping there. Then our little Walmart became a Supercenter and everything changed. All of a sudden, there were half as many available hours but twice as much work for each associate.

I had been trying for years to land a job at Walmart. People said it was a good company to work for, and the manager who hired me promised me full-time work. So I started out as a cashier working for \$7.78 an hour. In my four years there, I never got to full-time employment or a stable schedule. Do you know how hard it is to spend time with your family or pay your bills when you have no clue how many hours of work you're going to get or when you're going to work?<sup>1</sup>

I always had to choose my job at Walmart over time with my son because without me working, we wouldn't have the things that we have. I want my son and grandson to have a better future, so I left to find something else even though I loved my Walmart family.

That's why I was so mad when I read about the \$20 billion in buybacks from Walmart that made the executives and the Walton heirs even richer.<sup>2</sup> I don't mind investors making profits. I do mind when associates like me, who have been putting in the work day after day, year after year, don't get to share in those profits and our stores and customers get neglected.

It seems like Sam Walton is the only one who knew how to run a good business. He used to say that, "If you want the people in the stores taking care of the customers, you have to make sure you're taking care of the people in the stores." This is exactly why I filed a shareholder proposal at Walmart last year that would reward associates for our dedication and commitment to the company by getting a share of the profits from buybacks.<sup>3</sup> Shockingly, my proposal didn't pass.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://populardemocracy.org/sites/default/files/201806112\\_OUR%20Walmart%20Full%20Report%20-%20Web.pdf](https://populardemocracy.org/sites/default/files/201806112_OUR%20Walmart%20Full%20Report%20-%20Web.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.thestreet.com/story/14337590/1/does-walmart-have-an-activist-problem.html>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.vox.com/business-and-finance/2018/5/25/17379730/walmart-stock-buyback-worker-wages>

But it started a real conversation about how corporations like Walmart need to make different choices instead of squeezing workers. Lenore Palladino who is here today has done some great research about Walmart and buybacks. She showed that just \$10 billion of buybacks that Walmart authorized could have been used to give a million associates a \$5 hourly wage bump.<sup>4</sup>

If I sat on Walmart's Board of Directors, I wouldn't think twice about approving that decision. Can you imagine how much turnover we could reduce? Or how many part-time Associates could get off of public benefits? Or what a high-road standard that would set for other companies? It's so painful to think that could have been a reality but a small group of people at the top decided not to prioritize associates like me.

And this isn't just happening in retail but also in other industries. While preparing to speak here, I learned about how workers at other companies were facing a similar fate as us. Wells Fargo authorized over \$40 billion in buybacks since the 2017 tax bill. Meanwhile, a third of their workers make \$15 an hour, and the bank keeps sending thousands of jobs overseas.<sup>5</sup> At AT&T, the hedge fund Elliott Management is pushing to sell parts of the company and use that money for stock buybacks- money that could be used to bring internet access to millions of workers and businesses.<sup>6</sup> It concerns me that these corporations are not prioritizing investments in workers, the companies, and the communities.

What these companies are doing with buybacks is both wrong and harmful to the majority of us. And we don't get a say in any of it. Think about what corporate America would look like if workers at Walmart, Wells Fargo, AT&T, Sears and other companies actually had a seat at the table. We would invest the corporate profits back into the company, the workers and investors- all of them.

My fellow United for Respect leader Cat Davis tried to drive this point home when she filed a shareholder proposal at Walmart this year to have hourly associates on the company's board. Her proposal makes the case that having stakeholders, like workers, on the board could actually lead to long-term financial returns and profitability for all of us. Right now, Walmart's pay is so low that a full-time associate earning Walmart's starting wage still falls below the federal poverty line for a family of three. How shameful is it that we have to live in poverty while working for the largest private employer in the world which has billionaire owners who are worth \$175 billion?<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> <https://rooseveltinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Walmart-issue-brief.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> [https://betterbanks.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/WheelAreStillOff\\_report.pdf](https://betterbanks.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/WheelAreStillOff_report.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> <https://cwa-union.org/sites/default/files/cwa-att-elliott-factsheet.pdf>

<sup>7</sup>

<https://business.financialpost.com/news/retail-marketing/walton-family-fortune-balloons-to-175-2-billion-after-walmart-reports-holiday-earnings>

So what this committee is doing on regulating buybacks is really important. I'm here to ask you to seriously consider who you stand with: working people like me who work hard and reap little rewards, or corporate billionaires who will exploit every loophole to get richer?

By regulating how corporate profits are spent and who benefits from them, you are putting workers first and letting corporate America know that we matter. You're saying that if a company can issue billions in buybacks, it can afford a living wage and full-time employment for its workers. You're saying that it's time to end economic inequality in the U.S. so that working mothers like me can save for a better future for our kids.

There used to be a time in this country when two adults working 40 hours a week was good enough. It's not like that anymore. We have to work 2-3 jobs to make ends meet. We catch hell with all of the expenses and taxes we have to pay. We don't have billion dollar inheritances to fall back on like the Waltons do. But we have the power of our voices to call out corporations like Walmart for doing wrong by us.

Buybacks are a rigged game. They're not good for workers or for American companies. Whether you decide to ban them outright, regulate how they are issued, or pair them with a worker dividend, there needs to be bold, decisive action from all of you. The working people of America deserve a better shot at fairness and equality. Thank you.