



**Written Testimony of Anthony Marc Perrone
United Food and Commercial Workers International Union
Before the Committee on Oversight and Reform
U.S. House of Representatives**

**Regarding
No Worker Left Behind: Legislation Honoring Essential Workers**

June 10, 2020

Thank you, Chairwoman Maloney, Ranking Member Jordan, and members of the committee for the opportunity to testify on the experiences of workers in grocery, health care, and meat processing during this pandemic.

My name is Marc Perrone and I am the President of the United Food and Commercial Workers International Union (UFCW).

The UFCW is America's largest food and retail union representing 1.3 million hard-working men and women. Our members work in grocery stores, meatpacking, food processing, health care, chemical plants, retail, and senior care facilities. We have members that are Republican, Democrat, and Independent and they come from every state and congressional district.

I'm proud to say that our union represents the greatest strength of this nation – its diversity.

Our members are incredibly hard-working men and women and they are also on the frontlines of this pandemic.

All across this country, our healthcare, food processing, and food retail workers are risking their health and safety to ensure that the American people are taken care of, and our nation's food supply is safe, grocery store shelves are stocked, and pharmacies are distributing medication.

With respect to food workers, it is fair to state that the nature of the crisis we all are enduring would quickly worsen without them. These food workers deserve not only our gratitude, but adequate protection and provision for their health, safety, and financial security.

Let me be very clear, essential workers – as so many of you have called them – have earned essential protections. Jobs that face high risk, as these do in the Covid-19 world we are living in, must be provided the protections, benefits, and wages that reflect that high health risk.

I would like to begin with a voice from one of our grocery stores members who works at Ralph's in San Diego, California.

“Five people in my household work for Kroger and together, we put in about 250 hours per week. When Kroger gave us ‘Hero Pay,’ it felt like we mattered and they were recognizing the

risks we are taking. Every day, you fear that you might catch the virus at work. You fear that you might take the virus home to your family. I've had customers swear at me when we ask them to wear a mask. One customer even told me I might be dead in a month. After work each day, I want to cry, but I don't have the tears to cry because it's not going to make things better. We are working longer hours under stressful conditions. At my store, they take daily temperature scans, but the thermometers the company provides us don't work. Kroger and all grocery companies need to provide the protective equipment, testing, and essential pay that all of us need so that we can keep our stores operating safely. Our lives are on the line."

This story is not unique. It reflects a reality that is sometimes acknowledged with words but not with deeds and actions.

What this story and so many others I have heard illustrates is that our members did not sign up for this. No one goes to work at a grocery store or meat processing plant and thinks they will be putting their lives on the line every day.

Let me stress to you how real this issue is.

Our internal estimates have confirmed 225 of our members have tragically died and over 28,000 have been sick or been exposed.

Our members are dying. That is why UFCW supports legislation to compensate the families of essential workers who die as a result of COVID-19 or related complications and a cash benefit to essential workers who are hospitalized due to the novel coronavirus and recover. While financial compensation cannot bring back what is lost, it is the least we can do to support the families of those who have worked to keep us fed.

The U.S. government has established compensation programs for similar purposes in the past, including for victims of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and a longstanding program for public safety officers who die as a result of injuries sustained in the line of duty. We must now extend the same courtesy to food workers and build on these efforts to support this current group of frontline workers who definitely did not sign-up to put themselves in harm's way when they took a job at their local grocer.

Protecting these workers must never be about dollars and cents, it must be about protecting their life and recognizing the tragic sacrifices that some have made.

It is about this simple fact – we will never protect America's food supply unless – and until – we protect America's food workers.

Like health care workers and other occupations that are on the frontlines of this pandemic, our members have made incredible sacrifices to keep food on our nation's table.

They have had to isolate themselves, even going so far as to rent separate apartments or hotel rooms, so that they don't expose their family to the virus. When they return home from work at the grocery store

or meat processing plant, they must change immediately, stripping off all their clothes in a mudroom or on the front porch so that they can put this day's clothes directly into the wash.

All across the country, many are working longer hours, and now, some must endure the insult of having the "hero" pay, what some have also called hazard pay, taken away from them.

Listen to the words of this cashier from Lawrenceburg, Indiana:

"Since the coronavirus outbreak began, I've been working 60-70 hours a week. As a cashier, it's hard to social distance from customers. We put our lives on the line every day and I worry about taking the virus back to my grandchildren or husband. When Kroger took away our 'Hero Pay,' it felt like a slap in the face. Because Kroger is not requiring our customers to wear masks, it's putting us in jeopardy. The spread of the virus hasn't stopped, so neither should the protections or 'Hero Pay' that our families need."

UFCW members deserve and have earned "essential" worker pay and benefit increases and it should be available to all grocery store, pharmacy, food processing, and other food workers who are part of America's food supply chain.

These wage and benefit increases will not only protect the health and welfare of these hard-working men and women, they will help ensure all of America's families have the food they need to overcome the public health crisis our nation faces.

In the absence of direct action from our elected leaders, the UFCW International and our local unions have been actively negotiating with our employers across the country to secure premium pay for grocery and food processing workers.

Some responsible employers like Cargill and Safeway, have done what is right. Others, including Amazon, Walmart, and even union employers like Kroger have decided to put profits over people.

To be clear, we are determined to fight as hard as we can, but a company-by-company strategy is not enough and too many workers are being left out.

We hope that every company, union and non-union, does more to protect our food supply and the hardworking men and women keeping our communities stable and families fed. But the brutal reality is that many will not – and it is time that Democrats and Republicans work together to do more.

I know that these issues are often framed as a partisan battle. Our union members could care less about politics. They care about the health and safety of their families, and we urge you to share their concern.

That is why we think the paid sick days and paid family leave benefit that was included in the second stimulus bill, the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (H.R. 6201), needs to be broadened. The spread of COVID-19 has highlighted the health and economic consequences faced by working people when they lack access to paid sick days and paid family and medical leave. Millions of workers face the devastating decision between risking their own health or risking the loss of a paycheck or job.

While UFCW has been able to negotiate strong paid sick days protections for our members, we know that it will take uniform polices that are accessible to all to flatten the curve and prevent a second wave of infection.

All working people who are sick, who are affected by quarantine orders, or who are responsible for caring for children whose schools have been closed, should have job protection and paid sick leave for a minimum of 14 days.

Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), the federal government agency in charge of ensuring that employers provide safe conditions, must issue enforceable requirement specific to COVID-19.

To date that has not happened, and our members, especially those in healthcare and food processing are feeling the consequences.

I want to share another story, this time about a meat processing working in Sioux Falls, South Dakota:

Sandra is originally from Honduras and the mother of five who has worked in a processing plant for 15 years. When the outbreak came to her plant, Sandra got sick at work and experienced shortness of breath and a fever. She tested positive for coronavirus and is confident she was exposed at work. The day she went home, she remembers a coworker trying to talk to her in the locker room and pleading with her friend to not come near her so they wouldn't get sick too. Even in the darkest of times, her thoughts were with her fellow workers. She wasn't able to touch her children for over a week while she self-quarantined and recovered.

Sandra speaks about how good it feels to be known as an essential worker and how she knows that everybody is depending on them – doctors, nurses, and millions of Americans. However, she wants people to know that while they have pride in being essential, that's not enough. They need to be protected at work every day.

Seventy meatpacking workers in the U.S. have died from the new coronavirus and another 20,000 have tested positive. This is beyond tragic; it is unacceptable failure of the government's sacred duty – to protect others.

To be clear, OSHA can not only identify and punish the companies that are failing to protect workers, the USDA can direct plants to reduce line speeds and mandate social distancing inside the plants.

Congress can require the companies to prioritize meatpacking and food processing for COVID-19 testing; provide PPE free of charge; and protect workers from retaliation.

The UFCW believes that strong, anti-retaliation protections must be in place in order to ensure that workers who feel ill, or who are suffering from COVID-19, can remain at home, in quarantine for the full period of time recommended by the CDC, until it is safe to return to work.

Without these actions I can promise you that more Americans will needlessly get sick and die.

Again, the solutions that will help minimize the risk of this virus are within our grasp.

For the sake of the country I know we all love, I urge you to work together and do what is right for these brave workers.

Again, I thank you for your time and would be pleased to answer any questions that you may have.