



Trade and Labor: Creating and Enforcing Rules to Benefit American Workers.

Testimony of Steve Catanese, President of SEIU Local 668 presented to the Subcommittee on Trade of the Committee on Ways and Means, U.S. House of Representatives on March 26, 2019

Introduction

Good morning Chairman and Ranking Member and members of the Committee. I am Steve Catanese, the president of SEIU Local 668. We were originally founded as the Pennsylvania Social Services Union and today are made up of over 19,000 workers, the vast majority of whom are women who work for public sector employers. They include Corrections and Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors, Adult and Juvenile Probation Officers, 911 Dispatchers, Children and Youth Caseworkers, and many more. Our members work and reside in every county of the state, and span a range of ages, backgrounds and political affiliations.

Thank you for inviting me here today on behalf of the working men and women we represent to talk to you about the first-hand experiences we have had providing public services to communities that have been decimated over the past 25 years by bad trade policies.

Fewer support services for communities in crisis

Local 668's members work fields such as employment security, where they help connect workers facing mass layoffs with unemployment security and job training for new skills in an ever-changing economy. They are Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors who work with Pennsylvanians with disabilities to obtain gainful employment. They are Veterans Employment Representatives who assist veterans re-enter the workforce. They are social workers in children and youth services, helping families navigate support systems in times of crisis and need. In short, these workers are needed most when there are downturns in the economy to help working families weather them. But trade policies are gutting the tax base of state and local coffers and as a result fewer of these services can be offered at just the moment they are needed. And that's not all of our members. Simply put, Local 668 members see firsthand the impact on their communities when companies close their doors or scale back operations because of bad trade policy.

Too often social services are flat-funded or cut at moments when need among our state's most vulnerable citizens increases dramatically. In some cases, federal funding that supports social services dries up entirely, reducing public and social worker staff resources and leaving state and local agencies unable to effectively address the fallout from bad trade policies. In these cases, the workers I represent not only have their job security threatened but also constantly struggle to give their clients the attention they deserve, because of increasingly burdensome caseloads that are impossible to keep up with.

As an example, consider Unemployment Compensation - a program designed to help seasonal, underemployed, and unemployed workers cover expenses until they can find a new job. Most states have supplemental funds to support the operation of unemployment compensation systems due to declining federal funding for these programs. When one such federal funding stream dried up in 2012, the Philadelphia Unemployment Compensation Service Center was permanently closed.

So as Philadelphia struggled with systemic and structural employment challenges, in part due to a declining manufacturing sector, one of the main supports for underemployed and unemployed workers was eliminated, forcing more people into unemployment or lower-paying jobs. In our local, we are reminded of a former SEIU member whose finances were destroyed when the Philadelphia Unemployment Compensation Service Center was permanently closed. This skilled worker, with two graduate degrees, was forced to take Social Security benefits early after those closures - losing out on full benefits. Today, she can barely afford her medication costs.

As a former welfare caseworker myself, I have first-hand experience of how caseload sizes have increased in Pittsburgh, near my hometown in Western Pennsylvania, while staff and resources have declined each year. We've moved from putting people on a path out of poverty to processing paperwork. We don't sit with each client and work with them on plans for housing stability, food security, or stable employment because we no longer have the time or staff to do so. Yet we then have some who decry public assistance as enabling continued poverty. No, bad trade policies and cutting federal, state, and local funding for services does exactly that.

I hesitate to think about what the situation would be if our members didn't have a union to be a part of and use as a voice in advocating for improved services. It wouldn't just make their lives worse, it would harm our entire communities who would be turning to their government for help but finding, higher turnover and hard-working people who want to help them, but barely equipped to do so.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to thank the committee for inviting me here today to share the experiences of my members. Our members are dedicated public servants who choose to work in these fields to provide support and assistance to our communities. I share the frustrations of the 19,000 workers I represent when they face structural barriers to helping people in need. In my heart, I'll always be a caseworker and never forget the importance of the work we do and the lives it saves when we're resourced enough to do it right.

I am grateful to the committee for shining a light on the broader implications our trade policies have had on communities, including the economic impact the loss of this revenue base has had on public services in states like Pennsylvania. This reduction in public social services should be put in context and considered to fully understand how our trade policies are harming individuals and communities.

Thank you for your time.