

Testimony of Melody Benjamin
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Democratic Policy and Communications Committee
After *Janus v. AFSCME*: Why Teachers and Workers are Fighting Back Against the Secret
Money Campaign to Take Away Their Rights
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My name is Melody Benjamin and I am a home care worker from the Humboldt Park neighborhood of Chicago and a proud member of SEIU Healthcare Illinois. Thank you for this opportunity to share why unions are important to working people like me; and why corporate, powerful interests efforts to divide us and destroy unions hurt our country.

In our union, home care workers have a saying: “Invisible no more.” That’s because before a few brave homecare workers in Chicago started organizing other homecare workers together in the 1980’s, they were earning about \$3.30 an hour. And no one wanted to recognize that home care work was emotionally and physically demanding and deserved respect and a real wage. Unfortunately, this is likely tied to the fact that the homecare workforce is almost 90 percent women and over half of the workforce is comprised of women of color.ⁱ

Over the years, as more home care workers have joined together in my union, our voices have become louder, speaking out for better wages, training and working conditions to improve the work we love. Alone, we are invisible. Together, we are unstoppable.

Like many women and men who provide essential care that allows seniors or people with disabilities to live at home, I didn’t choose this profession; it chose me. I was young and studying to be a surgical technologist in 2010 when my mother needed bypass surgery to resolve blocked arteries in both her legs. After that day, our lives were forever changed. My mom could no longer live alone, so I left school to become her full-time home care worker. I was only making \$11.55 an hour. Of course, caring for my mother is an around-the-clock job — so I’ve often worked unpaid and babysat to make ends meet.

I joined my union, not just to earn a living wage, but to ensure that more working people like me see a future in delivering the kind of quality home care that everyone wants for themselves — or for their loved ones. I quickly found out the difference unions are making in this industry. Despite working full-time, more than half of home care workers are forced to rely on public assistance because of poverty-level wages and many struggle to care for their own families.ⁱⁱ Through my union, we are working to change this. Together with senior and disability allies, we are advocating for wage increases, more training opportunities and affordable healthcare. I’m now earning \$13 an hour and we will keep fighting for \$15 an hour.

I feel empowered when I see how home care workers in our union have achieved these goals and more in other states. In states across the country homecare workers have won training, healthcare, paid time off and even modest retirement benefits. One day I hope that all workers receive what so many people take for granted as basics.ⁱⁱⁱ

My union has also given me a sense of community. I thought I was alone and I was struggling. But through my union, I met other homecare workers. Together, we identify what needs to change in our profession and that's given me the confidence to talk to my elected officials, family, and neighbors to create a home care system that works for everyone. Both people like me who provide care and families who count on this care.

In a workforce plagued by extremely high turnover, rates partially due to the conditions of the job, the advancements we are fighting for will help attract and retain more home care workers just as demand is exploding.^{iv} Consider that 10,000 people turn 65 every day in this country and the incredible emotional, financial and physical demand that caring for a loved one places on families.^v Also consider that this is one of the fastest growing jobs in our country and simply not enough well-trained, well-paid home care workers.^{vi} We have a care crisis.

You would think that people serious about solving this care crisis and giving people the freedom to choose to age at home would support our right to choose to create strong unions if it would improve the quality of the job and mean that more people might join and stay in the workforce, right? Wrong.

Billionaire-funded extremist groups like the State Policy Network and Freedom Foundation have launched a series of aggressive attacks on working people. These attacks include:

- Using their power and influence to push cases like *Harris v. Quinn* and *Janus v. AFSCME* through our court system;
- Pushing the Trump Administration to undermine our freedom to use our pay to support our unions, which is how I am able to have my voice heard;
- Aggressively funding efforts to dismantle the foundations that our middle class created and that we all count on to be there: including efforts to repeal the Affordable Care Act with no replacement, and decimate Medicaid, Medicare and Social Security;
- And using the media to spread false rhetoric about homecare care workers providers and our their unions to try to silence us.

Between *Harris v. Quinn* and last month's *Janus* case, working people know all too well how important the Supreme Court is. We don't need another Justice who will further rig our economy and democracy against working people. As you and your colleagues consider a Supreme Court nominee, please don't forget that the decision on whether to confirm him or her directly affects people like me and my community. The Supreme Court may make decisions in Washington DC, but the rest of us around the country have to live with the consequences.

In closing, I want to be clear that home care workers see through these actions by these dark money groups and the Trump administration. We will not be stopped and we will not turn back. We will continue fighting to improve the care we provide, the work we love, and fighting to protect Medicaid for the people we care for.

The freedom to come together in a union is a basic right. And it's about our futures as home care workers as well as how our country will care for our seniors and loved ones. It's a middle class issue and it's a moral issue. We can no longer ignore the care crisis we have in this country. Who will care for children, parents, grandparents and loved ones if this industry becomes decimated by those who put politics and their wealth ahead of working people? We won't stand for it.

We ask you to stand with us and stand up to those forces who use their wealth and power to try to silence working people. We ask you to stand with workers as they are fighting to form or maintain their unions or for better working conditions through collective action. And we ask you to support policies that make it easier for working people everywhere to join unions and have their voices heard so that they too are "invisible no more." Thank you again for this opportunity.

ⁱ Stephen Campbell, Paraprofessional Healthcare Institute, [U.S. Home Care Workers: Key Facts](#) (2017)

ⁱⁱ Stephen Campbell, Paraprofessional Healthcare Institute, [U.S. Home Care Workers: Key Facts](#) (2017)

ⁱⁱⁱ Martha Ross, USC-Brookings Schaeffer on Healthy Policy, [A win-win: home health aide training program creates better care for patients, better jobs for workers](#) (2015); SEIU Healthcare MN, [Home Care Union Reaches Tentative Agreement with State of Minnesota](#) (2017); SEIU 775, [Washington State Legislature: Prepare for the Age Wave by investing in home care](#) (2015).

^{iv} Paraprofessional Healthcare Institute, [Paying the Price, How Poverty Wages Undermine Home Care in America](#) (2015); Judith Graham, *Washington Post*, [The disabled and the elderly are facing a big problem: Not enough aides](#) (2017).

^v Heimlich, Russell, Pew Research Center Fact Tank, [Baby Boomers Retire](#) (2010).

^{vi} U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics, [Fastest Growing Occupations](#) (2018); Robert Espanoza, Paraprofessional Healthcare Institute, [8 Signs the Shortage in Paid Caregivers Is Getting Worse](#) (2017); Chris Farrell, *Forbes*, [The Shortage Of Home Care Workers: Worse Than You Think](#) (2018); Judith Graham, *Washington Post*, [The disabled and the elderly are facing a big problem: Not enough aides](#) (2017).