

Senate Democratic Policy Committee Hearing on Workplace Issues | July 21, 2021

Testimony by Christoria Hughes

I'm a night shift cafeteria worker at UPMC Presbyterian. I go in around 6 PM and set up late night patient menus and get things ready for overnight staff dining. Night isn't quite as busy as daylight but you still get a good amount of people and they still want their food just the same.

I've worked at Presby since I moved to Pittsburgh twelve years ago. I came up from North Carolina so my granddaughter could go to school. UPMC was the largest company in the region, they were hiring, and I figured it would be the best job in town and I like helping people. .. Since I couldn't afford a car, I took an apartment nearby so I can walk to work.

No matter how hard I work, I can't make enough money to move up or get any ease. . I need to eat and keep a roof over our head and I have bills to pay. I also have to help look after 6 young people, whose parents are also struggling. People say UPMC is a charity, but we are the charity. We work and work and give and give.

UPMC raises aren't very much – maybe 1 or 2 percent – so it took me almost 3 years to get a full dollar raise. I finally made it to \$15 an hour about a year ago. They said they'd move us to \$15 five or six years ago, but that's not how it worked out. And you still have people making less than that, because what UPMC says is now they'll *start* people at \$15, but for those who have been there and are gradually working their way up, you've basically lost all that time. And after a point there's not much room for advancement.

Jeffrey Romoff, the CEO – I call him Jeff – is making \$9 million a year. At a non-profit.

We workers got together one day to do some math, and we figured out that if we started as service workers in one of Romoff's hospitals at the end of the Civil War, and worked full time right up to today, we would still have a century to go before we make what he made just last year.

That right there is the story of race and wealth disparities. He accumulates, we fall behind.

Pittsburgh's City Council has declared the city's racism a public health crisis. A recent Gender Equity Council report showed Black Pittsburghers lead shorter lives, have worse health outcomes, and are more likely to live in poverty than white Pittsburghers. The region's largest employer keeps its largely Black and female service workforce in poverty. That's just the truth. This is what it's like to be a Black woman in Pittsburgh. The wages paid to hospital workers aren't enough to live on. I've worked full time for 12 years and I live with multiple generations of family members because UPMC wages aren't high enough for us to pay the rent. I can't afford to

take time off from work for any reason, not even to go to the doctor. Of course our health outcomes are bad.

Employers like UPMC keep their workers in poverty and make it impossible for us to participate in civic life, in family life, in anything outside of work. No wonder Pittsburgh is the worst city in the country for Black women.

One thing that would help is if we could form our union. But it's hard for us to organize because UPMC fights us tooth and nail, and it's terrifying. I have co-workers who have been working alongside me for years who are on public assistance just to get by, and they aren't living in good conditions. But they are scared to speak out, because how can they go up against a powerful corporation that pretty much owns everything in the city?

Organizing for our union is about more than UPMC workers too. When schools close, when buslines close, when neighborhoods deteriorate, that's all related to UPMC. Because they don't pay taxes! If UPMC paid their fare share, this would be a different city.

A union at UPMC would be a good thing for Pittsburgh. Regardless of how much UPMC fights it, the ability to bargain for fair wages, pensions, and healthcare is the only way to close the gap between white Pittsburghers and Black Pittsburghers. We deserve to live too. We deserve our health too. We deserve to enjoy our families too. We need to build the city up for real people like me.

That means bringing real union work back to Pittsburgh. This city has the third-highest rate of poverty among working-age African-Americans out of all major U.S. metropolitan areas. We know why. And we know how to solve it. We just need people like you all to help us get it done.