

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

WEBINAR

BEYOND GIVING THANKS:  
PAY, PROTECTIONS, AND POLICIES FRONTLINE ESSENTIAL WORKERS STILL NEED

Washington, D.C.

Monday, November 23, 2020

**PARTICIPANTS:**

**Opening Remarks:**

THE HONORABLE SHERROD BROWN (D-OH)  
U.S. Senate

**Panel Discussion:**

MOLLY KINDER, Moderator  
David M. Rubenstein Fellow, Metropolitan Policy Program  
The Brookings Institution

LISA HARRIS  
Cashier  
Kroger (Richmond, Virginia)

SABRINA HOPPS  
Housekeeper  
Acute Care Facility (Washington, D.C.)

JEFFREY REID  
Meat Clerk  
Giant (Greater Washington, D.C. area)

**Fireside Chat:**

MOLLY KINDER, Moderator  
David M. Rubenstein Fellow, Metropolitan Policy Program  
The Brookings Institution

MARY KAY HENRY  
International President  
Service Employees International Union (SEIU)

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## P R O C E E D I N G S

MS. KINDER: (in progress) nearly half of whom are risking their lives for less than a living wage. We also chose this timing because it's the week of Thanksgiving and it's a chance for us to step back and appreciate some of their sacrifices. But, of course, these workers need more than our thanks.

And to hear what they need I am delighted to welcome our keynote speaker, Senator Sherrod Brown of Ohio. Throughout his career, Senator Brown has been a fierce advocate for workers, and that has been especially clear during the pandemic. He's been one of the leading voices in Congress for better protections and pay for frontline workers. Way back in March he wrote to President Trump calling for the administration to introduce pandemic premium pay, and he hasn't let go of that issue. He's written to grocery CEOs encouraging them to reinstate the hazard pay they abandoned.

So, with that, I'd like to welcome Senator Brown to introduce his keynote remarks.

SENATOR BROWN: Ms. Kinder, thank you. It's an honor to be here. Thanks for the work you do, Molly Kinder, of shining a light on workers and their struggles and their lives during this pandemic. It really is — my wife, as some of you know, is a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist and she, as you do, shines a light on people that the media often forget about, the kind of workers that are sharing their stories today and how important that is to the public. The public thinks about these workers, these non — these "essential workers" who don't see themselves as essential. I mean I remember talking to one grocery store worker in southern Ohio who told me some months ago they call me essential but I feel expendable because they don't pay me much and they don't make me safe at work.

So the work that, Molly — the writing you've done and the studies you've done and the light you have shone is what good journalism and good activism is all about. So thank you. And, again, thanks to the workers sharing their stories today, thanks to my longtime friend, Mary Kay Henry, with SEIU, the union that represents so many workers who because of this union are becoming middle class workers. Not enough of them yet because of the economic forces of our society, but the struggle that she helps to lead as so many SEIU activists do around the country.

That grocery store worker I mentioned that said I feel expendable, she and thousands of others are on the front lines of this pandemic, obviously. They risk their lives so Americans can keep food

on their tables, get their packages delivered, they change linens in hospitals, they are the security guards and the custodians, they drive buses. We can just see the numbers of workers that have died and so often during the pandemic, so often these are the essential workers that every day go to work exposing themselves potentially to this virus and every night come home to their family, in many cases not sleeping particularly well, anxious always about whether they're going to infect the people whom they love most. It's these essential workers that keep our society going. I mean it's just so obvious.

Corporations claim to recognize that, they run feel good TV ads saying thank you to our grocery store workers, thank you to our bus drivers, thank you to our hospital workers. They claim these workers are a heart of their core companies, but saying thank you is not enough. A number of companies at the beginning of the pandemic paid pandemic pay. Almost all of those companies have now backed off doing that. But workers — and it's pretty simple — workers don't need a public relations campaign, they need fair pay, they need better protections on the job. It's really pretty simple. These corporations may get positive press off their workers by bragging about them from time to time, but they too often pay poverty wages, in too many cases failing to protect their safety. These workers are typically more women than men, they're disproportionately people of color, and most of them, again, aren't paid very well.

This summer I wrote an open letter to corporate executives, published it in their paper of record, the Wall Street Journal. I was frankly a little surprised the Wall Street Journal was willing to print something that really did contrast most of their readers, what they're doing with what they should do. But they ran it and it pointed out that these corporations are saying their workers are essential, but then they don't treat them that way. Our economy is supposed to reward people whose talents are in high demand. That's what we're taught, that's how capitalism works, right? These workers' skills are keeping our economy going. Their paychecks, pure and simple, should reflect that. These workers often weren't paid nearly enough to begin with. Many of them don't have paid sick days or certainly don't have enough paid sick days. If they get Coronavirus they face the choice between going to work and risk infecting their coworkers and customers or going without the paycheck they need to pay the rent.

All year I've been calling on government to stand on the side of workers with hazard pay, with an OSHA emergency temporary standard to protect workers on the job, with broader changes that reorient our economy from wealth to — raise the minimum wage, empower unions, fix the overtime rule,

end the corporate business model that treats workers as expendable. If this worker gets sick or this worker quits because she doesn't want to be around the public because of the Coronavirus, then we can always find someone else.

Mitch McConnell and Donald Trump have essentially blocked all of that so far — 80 million voters — 80 million voters and climbing, on Electoral College landslide, according to Donald Trump's own definition — 80 million voters sent a clear message in this election. They've had enough of Wall Street running the economy, they want a government that's actually on their side.

There's a lot we can do with President Biden and Vice President Harris to deliver for workers' right away. President Biden can immediately issue an OSHA emergency temporary standard forcing companies to take critical steps to protect workers from contracting or spreading the virus in the workplace. You all know about the case in Sioux Falls, South Dakota where the workers in a meat packing plant where 1200 workers were diagnosed with the Coronavirus. That company —only after prodding from many of use — the company finally faced a fine. The Trump administration fined this multi-billion-dollar Chinese owned company \$13,000 for affecting 1200 workers. I mean that's what we've seen.

But Vice President Biden can do so much more with this emergency temporary standard. We can raise the minimum wage to \$15 an hour, empowering unions, cracking down on corporations that use the subcontracting and independent contractors and other tricks to pay workers less and deny them benefits. We've seen an economy where far too many people are put into that category, they're gig workers. Call them what you might, but the fact is too few get decent pay, too few get decent benefits.

And if Mitch McConnell is still the majority leader, that job will be harder to get Congress to do that, but it's not an impossible task. Minimum wage will pass, sick days and paid family leave, and all the pro worker legislation Americans voted for, Speaker Pelosi will do that in the House. Mitch McConnell — we'll dare Mitch McConnell to stand in the way of that progress. Joe Biden is going to kick the corporate lawyers out of the Department of Labor, appoint a pro-worker secretary of labor who actually puts workers' rights first. The Trump secretary of labor was a corporate lawyer who made millions of dollars representing corporations against workers, against unions, and against workers.

It comes back — and I'll close with this — it comes back to the dignity of work, the idea

that hard work should pay off for everyone, no matter who you are, where you live, what kind of work you do — whether you punch a clock or swipe a badge, whether you work for tips, whether you're taking care of sick family members at home. If you love this country, you fight for the people who make it work, people like essential workers. And I'm hopeful by this time next year America will see that we finally have a government that's actually on their side.

Molly, thank you so much.

MS. KINDER: Great. Thank you so much, Senator Brown. Thank you for framing these issues with such urgency and for all of your leadership in fighting for every issue that you raised. And a very happy Thanksgiving to you and your family.

SENATOR BROWN: Be safe. Thanks, Molly. All right. Thanks, everybody.

MS. KINDER: Thank you.

So, since the pandemic began, I've focused my research at Brookings and my writing on exactly these issues that Senator Brown has just raised. And underpinning all of my writing has been the experiences and the voices of the frontline workers themselves.

So, I've had the opportunity since March to have dozens of interviews with a range of frontline workers, from poultry plant workers to home health aides to nurses, nursing home cooks, retail workers, and mail carriers. And these workers have not only informed my research, but they've inspired my research as well. And today I am absolutely delighted to have the chance to introduce to you three of those frontline essential workers that have had the biggest impact on me over the course of the pandemic.

Lisa Harris, a Kroger — a cashier at Kroger just outside Richmond, Virginia, Jeffrey Reid, a meat clerk at a Giant Food outside of Washington, D.C., and Sabrina Hopps, a housekeeping supervisor in an acute care facility in Washington, D.C. We prerecorded our panel discussion on Saturday to accommodate the three of their work shifts. And I'm just so grateful for Lisa, Jeffrey, and Sabrina for their generosity in not only sharing their stories with me, but with the public through this event today and through so many of my writing and reports over the last eight months where their voices and stories are represented, including as recently as on Friday when we published a new report on the 13 biggest retail companies in the country and how they're balancing pandemic profits and pay.

There were a lot of other workers I interviewed with powerful stories, but they don't have the same ability as Lisa, Sabrina, and Jeffrey to speak on their own voice, with their own names, and on a panel like this. And that's because they don't have the same union protections that the three workers you're going to hear from today enjoy. Lisa and Jeffrey are both shop stewards through UFCW Local 400 and Sabrina was a long-time member of SEIU 1199.

We're so grateful for them for sharing their stories and also for agreeing to serve on the first of its kind for Brookings worker advisory board where they're going to continue to shape our scholarship and inspire our work in the months ahead.

And, with that, I'd like to play for you the panel discussion that we recorded on Saturday.  
(Pre-recorded panel begins)

MS. KINDER: Lisa, Sabrina, and Jeffrey, we are just delighted to have you with us today for this event. Thank you for taking the time to speak with us.

Lisa, I'd love to start with you. You know, when we first met it was back in March when this pandemic was just starting. I drove down to your Kroger just outside of Richmond. And my memory of it was a packed store full of customers on a Saturday and no one was wearing a mask, because back then we didn't even have that awareness. And I'd just love to hear from you what has your experience been like on the front lines of the pandemic. Can you explain to us how that felt in those early days and now as we're going into an even deadlier winter?

MS. HARRIS: Well, it's still packed. It feels — I've heard people say demoralizing. Kroger used to use this phrase that we're all family. It feels like we're that part of the family you don't really invite over for Christmas. It's a whole different paradigm from where we started because it's gotten to be routine now. The asks that keep on coming, the changes in policy to accommodate something with having to do with COVID that, you know, should have been thought of, the changes in technology that have not slowed down during all of this, and we're getting closer to the holidays, so people are wondering how they're going to put meals on the table for their family. It's not what we thought these holidays would look like.

MS. KINDER: Now, Lisa, I know in Virginia, where you work, you know, cases are really spiking.

MS. HARRIS: Yes.

MS. KINDER: And as we head toward Thanksgiving and, you know, people — I'm seeing headlines about stores like Kroger having to limit essential items. I mean we could be heading back into a situation where restaurants will be shut, people will be home and needing to go grocery stores as cases —

MS. HARRIS: Yes.

MS. KINDER: How are you personally feeling as we go into what could be a deadlier phase in the pandemic and how are you seeing morale in your store?

MS. HARRIS: I'm not seeing the morale. People are not feeling like it's worth it to come in. We have holes to fill in the day of people that called in for various reasons because they — they're seeing the risk reward not being there. So — and you're seeing the exact same number of people as you were before. So our idea of us being heroes and making it through this time has not changed, it's just that Kroger's view of us deserving the rewards that they have given and then taken away has changed.

MS. KINDER: Thanks, Lisa.

MS. HARRIS: Yeah.

MS. KINDER: Sabrina, I know you work as a housekeeping supervisor at an acute care facility in D.C. You were a housekeeping aide and you've been recently promoted. And here in the D.C. region, again the case numbers are going up. And you've been there throughout this entire pandemic working with your clients, with the patients who are in a lot of cases very ill and sometimes on ventilators.

Can you tell us a little bit about that experience? You know, how has your job changed during the pandemic and how have you felt?

MS. HOPPS: Well, my job has changed. I have become a supervisor within the last four months. But before I was a housekeeper and just dealing with the patients, no visitors, no one to come inside the building, just immediate staff that's in the building. You know, it's time consuming, it's scary, you know. We don't know — being a housekeeper you never know what a patient has. So, it's scary, it's petrifying to be working with a patient and not know if they have COVID-19 or any type of disease that can hurt me and I can bring it home.

MS. KINDER: Now, are you — when you go into the rooms, for instance, to clean, do

you have protective equipment?

MS. HOPPS: Yes, we have PPE. We have N95 masks, we have gowns, we have gloves, we have booties, and we also have hair coverings.

MS. KINDER: And did you wear these kinds of protective equipment before this pandemic? Or is this new since COVID?

MS. HOPPS: It's new since COVID. We had to use them only when a specified condition for a patient. If a patient had contact, we wore the gowns, the gloves and just the gowns and the gloves. Now we have to have on N95 masks, the gowns, the gloves, and also face shields. Now it's a must that we wear face shields in the building.

MS. KINDER: Wow. That's something. You — imagine having to suit up every day in all of that equipment.

Now, Sabrina, something that's always struck me when we talk is how your role in certain ways has shifted in the pandemic because a lot of these patients can't have visitors. So, while you functionally are responsible for cleaning, there's a lot more to the job given how much the pandemic has shifted.

I'd love to just hear you reflect a little bit on what you think the patients need from you in this time.

MS. HOPPS: They need companionship because D.C. has shut down all visitation to all nursing homes and hospitals. No one is allowed in the building. So, it's our job as housekeepers, nurses, patient care techs, whoever is going in the room, to communicate with the patients. I've seen a lot of patients deteriorate over the time. I've seen a lot of patients expire over the time. But I keep going back to work because they need someone from the outside to communicate with them.

MS. KINDER: That's great, Sabrina. And, you know, with all this risk you're facing — so because of all the HIPAA laws they can't tell you if you're going into a room whether or not that patient might have COVID. And while you're all suited up, I imagine that the risks of getting COVID are quite real to you.

How have you felt personally having to face these kinds of risks?

MS. HOPPS: I'm scared. I'm petrified because I can get COVID and bring it home to my



daughter, my granddaughter, and my son. That's not good. But I keep going to work, I keep going and fighting for the patients and making sure the hospital is clean.

MS. KINDER: And do you have — you had mentioned before to me about some extra vulnerability that your family has. You live with them, is that correct?

MS. HOPPS: Yes.

MS. KINDER: So when you come home you're in the same household. And some of the family members you live with have special vulnerabilities. Is that correct?

MS. HOPPS: Yes. My son is a cancer survivor and also asthmatic, and so is myself. So, our chances of surviving COVID is slim to none if one of us were to get it.

MS. KINDER: Wow. Thank you, Sabrina.

Jeffrey, I'd love to bring you in. So, we first met back in March, same time as I met Lisa, and we've had conversations throughout this entire pandemic. So, I feel like I've journeyed with you as things have shifted it seems like every day.

I'd love to just go back to those early days of the pandemic and just hear you reflect a little bit. What was it like when suddenly your store — you work at a Giant Food just outside of Washington, D.C. — what were those early days of the pandemic like and has that changed at all since then?

MR. REID: Well, in the early days it was just basically like it was just a lot of fear and, you know, because, you know, no one knew. And it was like you couldn't get a straight answer from this current administration because, you know, the president was saying, hey, this thing is going to go away. So, you know, on one hand you're like, okay, everything is going to be fine, you know, because this is the president saying this, but then on the other hand, you know, we saw what, you know, these numbers were, you know, were spiking and, you know, people were dying. So, you know, I went from just like a guy that, you know, every day I'd get up and say my prayers and, you know, take a shower and I'm out the door, you know, I mean to go to, you know, do my eight hours. And so, I went from that to being — then, you know, Maryland was one of the states that designated us as essential workers, so now, you know, I was thrust on the front line of this pandemic.

And so now, you know, my co-workers and myself, we, you know, we had a lot of

questions and concerns like because, you know, the sheer density that we were being faced with on, you know, these stores on a daily basis because what a lot of states — as the numbers continue to spike, right, a lot of states were — you know, put these stay at home mandates in place, right, and grocery stores was, you know, were essential so they remained open. So, we had a ton of people that we were dealing with on a daily basis. And, you know, it's overwhelming, you know, to pull up in the parking lot at — you know, my shift started at 6 a.m. on some mornings and I pull up, it's like a mob of people there waiting outside, you know, for the store to open.

And at that particular time, I would say it was pandemonium shopping starting. Everybody was over buying and you couldn't keep the supply on the store. You know, I mean just the basic necessities like toilet paper or water and you know, things and stuff that people are — you know, they were used to — accustomed to being able to go to the store, let me just grab this. They weren't there because the supply chain was stretched to that point where, you know, you just couldn't keep up. And, you know, these people had questions, they want to know well, hey, why we can't — why don't you have toilet paper, why don't you have meat, why don't you have eggs. I mean these are basic necessities. And so it was like a lot of tension, you know, was in the stores. And, you know, grocery stores for the most part, you know, they're in communities. You know, I know my customers. You know, I've seen kids grow up. You know, I mean I've seen couples get divorced, I've seen — you know, I mean kids go off to college, you know what I mean. And you know these people and you just — you know, you just didn't have any answers for them. And, you know, me and my co-workers and myself, we were — I was scared to, death because I'm saying, you know, I didn't want to, you know, contract this virus, I didn't want to bring this home to my family.

And I was lucky because I think Montgomery County kind of, you know, reacted, you know — they reacted fast, you know. Initially, you know, we had the PPE. They made all those things available to us. So in that respect I feel that I was lucky. And plus, you know, my being — having to, you know, work for a company that's a union company, so to speak. You know, we — you know, they fought for us to make sure that we had all these things in place. But, you know, until they instituted the social distancing where they were counting people in the stores and things of that nature, it was like the sheer density. Because you're listening to the CDC, they're telling you, say listen, avoid crowds, you know, you

social distance yourself. And to be totally honest, this is — that wasn't happening in the grocery stores at the beginning, because it was tons and tons of people in there and they were over buying. And it was just like, man, you could just look at — see people coming down the aisle and to see them with the — you know, they have the mask and the gloves and you could just like see the fear on the people's faces, and these are people that you're used to conversing with on the daily basis. And it was like, you know, it's like they're scared, you know what I mean.

So that in turn trickled to, you know, my co-workers and myself. So it was like I know, you know, that I work with people that have preexisting conditions. You know they got high blood pressure and they — you know, they can pretty much check off every box, you know what I mean. Or what they were saying that, you know, would make you high susceptible to this virus. So — but at the same token, you know, and myself included, even though I don't have any preexisting conditions, my bills gotta be paid, right, you know.

And I felt good the fact that, you know, me as a grocery worker people would designate us as heroes. You know, I mean everybody was hug a grocery worker week. You know, I mean all that felt good in the beginning, right. So, you go from that to be like wow, man, you know, this thing is — you know, I feel good about myself, man. Maybe, you know, meaning we hunkering down at the most challenging time of our lives and we performed at a high level because, you know, that took a lot of work keeping those stores clean and keeping those shelves stocked and all that, trying to provide customer service at a high level. You know, that took a — that was a daunting task, right.

And that's how I felt initially.

MS. KINDER: Initially. Yeah, that's great, Jeffrey.

I remember when we spoke you talked about a little kid dressed up as a grocery worker for superhero day. (Laughter) And those early weeks it was — I mean we featured all three of you with the term hero, the frontline heroes, and that was really reflecting I think a lot of this groundswell of public appreciation.

But, Jeffrey, we spoke again and I remember by June, I mean you were singing a different tune because things had changed so much. So, can you fill us in? What happened in the — from that beginning of the pandemic to the summer that shifted so much?

MR. REID: So like I said, initially, you know, like — and during those first — I want to say like the first three weeks of March, you know, the sales quadrupled, you know, in a lot of — you know, a lot of grocery stores the sale were just — you know, they went from triple digits and they had all these profit margins. But, you know, you can't really sit back and pat yourself on the back about all your revenue gains and all that, because like I said, people were dying. So now, you know — and you look at all these — at the enormous profits that these companies are making and they chose to, you know — they cut out the hazard pay, you know what I mean. So I'm like, wait a minute now, okay, last thing I check, you know what I mean, this thing — you know, this virus is still a major health issue, you know, I mean on the international level and we're still at a crisis. People are still dying. I've still got to wear my mask in the store, you know what I mean. I've still got to — you know, they still have the social distancing lines in the store.

And every day I look at the news, you know, these numbers are spiking and people are dying. So I'm like, wait a minute, a hazard is still out here, so now we don't get hazard pay. And then you look and they wanted to give — in my particular store they gave like all full-time workers they gave you a \$300 bonus and if you were part-time they gave you a \$100 bonus. So, then you look at a \$300 bonus and you say, oh, wait a minute, okay, wow, a \$300 bonus and I'm in the 35 percent tax bracket, so that \$300 becomes \$170. so, you know, it's simple mathematics now. But then you look and see that, you know, I mean these people are making profits in the billions. I mean they're making billions. Let that sink in — not hundreds of thousand, but they're making billions and billions of dollars of profit. And, you know, without us, you know what I mean, they can't make this profit.

So now where is this — okay, I mean where is the justice in that? So, you look at yourself and that's like a slap in the face now. Now you're really — it's like it's an integrity issue. Now you're insulting my integrity. I don't (inaudible)— you know, I'm an essential worker, you're going to pat me on back. So now I'm feeling like we're sacrificial now, right. And here's the thing, so in — it's just not fair. And the bottom line is simple mathematics. You people are making billions and billions of dollars so, you know, why not, you know, put the money at — to the people that's making it possible for you to do that.

So, you know — and it's — and people are still dying. So, the hazard is still out there.

So, to me — because it was a no brainer. To me it was just like it's corporate greed the reason why they cut away with the hazard pay. And I'm going to put, you know, flat out, bottom line, corporate greed.

MS. KINDER: Well, Jeffrey, I really appreciate those comments. And, you know, we just put out on Friday a report looking specifically at the top retail and grocery companies, including the parent company for Giant as well as Kroger, where Lisa works. So we've run the numbers and, in fact, you, Jeffrey, you're our starting quotes and our ending quotes, and Lisa you're in there as well. And we talk a lot about that, this exact issue you brought up, Jeffrey, that the grocery companies, including the two you work at, but others as well, started with hazard pay, had lots of different names, but by June it was all gone.

And, Jeffrey, in the case of Giant, not only did that hazard pay go away, at the same time as those billions were being made, but, you know, the parent company for Giant carried on doing stock buybacks worth well more — they bought more in — they spent more money on buying back (inaudible) than they did on workers on the frontline.

So I know you've already spoken to that, but I want to bring in Lisa for a moment because at Kroger you were initially getting \$2 an hour hero pay and that went away. And, you know, we've spoken a lot about how Kroger — we put this in report — I mean starting wages were (inaudible) \$10 an hour. You know, if you have a family, you're earning poverty wages at that point. You can't support a family on that number. And the hazard pay was introduced and then it was taken away.

So, Lisa, I'd love to hear from you about that experience and why you think that was — your thoughts on that. And a little bit of a comment on what that missing \$2 an hour would mean for your colleagues.

MS. HARRIS: I started with Kroger 13 years ago. I'm not yet making \$15 an hour. So that \$2 an hour is a very large difference, and I know that from experience because I get asked to help with certain things with our union occasionally and they do provide \$15 an hour. When I'm with them I'm able to meet all my bills, when I'm not I have to ask my mother and my boyfriend for help. This is why we campaigned so hard during this last election. I was out for a little bit helping with that and I'm proud of it because it — Jeffrey was talking about some of the things this past president has said about COVID. That's not our reality. We've had three cases in our store so far. When I came back from campaigning, I

was greeted with hello, welcome back, we've had one more case. It's scary. It motivates people to not want to come in, to not want to commit their time for such a low amount of money. We may not be college educated, many of us, but we see what's happening and we see these numbers and they don't match up.

So, yeah, that's what we're seeing.

MS. KINDER: And, Lisa, I've been really struck. You've told me that some of your colleagues — you've given me some anecdotes about what those low wages mean in terms of the ability of your colleagues to even pay for their own groceries. So tell me a little bit about what that \$10 an hour looks like.

MS. HARRIS: Yeah, it — they — the ability for them to make rent sometimes — we were heroes — they used the term hero pay, and it's not there anymore. And the — we talked about how it was before — can you repeat the last —

MS. KINDER: Yeah, that, you know, you've told me that some of your colleagues who work in the grocery store have to pay for their own groceries with food stamps.

MS. HARRIS: Yes. And they have and still do.

MS. KINDER: They still do?

MS. HARRIS: Yeah. And we've gotten little, you know, about \$100 bonuses added to our Kroger card, meaning you can only use it at Kroger, multiple times. And that is also a slap in the face. It's — you can't even use it where you want to, it only can be used at Kroger, adding to their profit margins. We are working so hard. We were working — I don't know a single person in there who's not filling in for one or two people. I mean I work at the self-service station where we're dealing with six customers at a time, you know, during the holiday. There was a time when like the only things that would bring in the kind of numbers we're seeing now was if it was inclement weather coming or the holidays, and now it's every day.

MS. KINDER: Now it's every day. Wow. Thanks, Lisa.

Sabrina, I was delighted that partway through the last few months when we've been talking about the pandemic you were promoted, which means your wage has gone up. And in this context of where a lot of essential workers have lost hazard pay, you know, you're a good news story of

somebody who is now going into this, but you're making a little bit more money.

And I'm just curious, like what has that meant to you? What has earning, you know, more than \$15 an hour now, in a very expensive city, what — how is that — what does that mean to you and what does that tell you about this conversation about wages?

MS. HOBBS: It makes me want to cry, you know, because I had been where Lisa and Jeffrey was. Before I got my promotion, I was making under \$15 an hour and we only got heroes pay twice. Mine was \$26.40 out of two pay periods. So, I could understand where they're coming from.

With my promotion, I am able to take on the bulk of the bills in my household and that my son and my daughter save some money so they're able to move out on their own. But it still doesn't make it better because my son and my daughter have been affected by COVID-19. They went from working full-time to part-time. My daughter hasn't worked in three weeks. My son is working three days a week. So with my raise I'm able to take over what they cannot afford.

MS. KINDER: Yeah. So this is a good reminder that when we talk about essential workers, you're part of families, you're part of households and you're being impacted by this recession at the same time that you're risking your lives.

So I know we don't have very much time left, so what I want to do is hear from each of you what do you — we have some opportunities — there's a new president that's just been elected who will start in January — and, you know, Congress is still deciding how to respond to this pandemic, what a stimulus is going to look like. And at the same time, we're going into the worst phase yet of the pandemic. So I'd love to hear from each of you, what do you want to see, what would — what is the most important thing that leaders in Washington, and even your employers, can do to get you through this difficult winter? But where do you want to be at the end of all of this. What needs to happen so that when this pandemic is behind us that workers are doing better than they were before this all started?

So I'd love to start — why don't we start with Jeffrey? And I'd love to hear from you.

MR. REID: Okay. Bottom line with me is that this pandemic still constitutes a public health emergency of international concern, right. We know this, we've seen this. And Coronavirus, it doesn't care if you're from a blue state or a red state, it doesn't care if you're rich or poor or young or old or if you have preexisting conditions or not. It does not matter. And the fact of the matter is that we were

put in some — a horrendous risk, you know, essential workers. We were put in horrendous risk working on the frontlines in this thing every day.

So I'm thinking that now hopefully with this new administration taking over that maybe the government can step in and, you know, put some things in place and institute some policy that, you know, that can protect workers so this doesn't happen to us again, right, and make things readily available, like PPE and, you know, making sure people have masks and, you know, have a plan implemented, you know, and put some things in place that we don't have to go through this again.

And basically, you know, take care of your workers because right now, unless the government steps in and does something, then, you know, our safety is being basically — is in the hands of a company that shows you that, you know, it's all about the bottom line, you know what I mean. So, yeah, it's okay, they might lose a few workers here or there, but hey, man, we're still making billions here, you know.

So, you know, I mean I think that, you know, the government is going to have to, you know, step in and, you know, put some policy in place that, you know, that could give us — you know, make sure that we're getting paid because, frankly, you know, at the end of the day, you know, although I appreciate it, but thank you is not enough. You know, I mean I can't put food on my table with thank you, you know, I can't pay my mortgage or my rent, you know, give my power company a thank you. You know, bottom line. And, you know, I mean somebody has to go to work out here during this pandemic and, you know, and respect me, you know what I mean, grocery. You know, I a grocery worker. That's my business and that's what I do. And, you know, I can't sit at home and Zoom your groceries to you. These stores have to be stocked, you know what I mean, and it's gotta be customer service. And it has — and that's what we did. We hunkered down to performed at a high level. And, you know, I mean, I just want to be paid fairly for that, you know, me — and, you now, working during this hazard.

That's how I feel.

MS. KINDER: Great. Thanks, Jeffrey.

Sabrina?

MS. HOPPS: My hope is that they do find a cure for it and, you know, just like Jeffrey said, you know, more PPE for the employees. You know, somebody that cares. You can't keep saying



that we are essential workers and treating us like we're anything. No, that's not fair to us, that's not fair to the world, especially, you know, that the grocery store workers and housekeeping, maintenance, LPNs, everybody that's not a doctor or a nurse, we all matter too. We all are here (inaudible). We all are out here fighting this battle.

So our new president, they really need to figure out what this pandemic has done to the world first and try to fix it, because we all want to be alive at the end of this. I know I do.

MS. KINDER: Thanks, Sabrina.

MS. HOPPS: You're welcome.

MS. KINDER: Lisa?

MS. HARRIS: So the — anyone can do — go through a rough time when they know when the end date is. We're seeing vaccines come out, so we're seeing how long it's going to take to get to people, how long it's going to take to be effective once many people have taken it. We are hopeful.

Like I said, I campaigned to help with Joe Biden's transition, and that's not going to smoothly. They need access to the numbers and the facts about what's happening with COVID from the last administration, which as far as I know have been denied access to a lot of things that could help with everyone's care. You can't play Russian Roulette with people's lives. This is not about who wins and who loses, this is about people's health on a day to day basis, people that I see and know every single day. We can feel the mood of what happens in our store and it's scary, but I am hopeful.

My motivation is to say that I lived through a pandemic at the end of this.

MS. KINDER: Great. Well, Lisa, Jeffrey, and Sabrina, I can't thank you enough. Your stories are so powerful. Over the last eight months it's just been such an honor to get to know each of you. And I appreciate your willingness to step up and share your stories with the world. And keep fighting to make sure that all these 50 million frontline essential workers like yourselves are protected, that they earn the decency of a living wage, that they get the hazard pay they deserve and, frankly, that they're respected for doing what you're doing, which is — Sabrina, not only are you keeping acute care facilities clean, but you're providing that companionship to some of the most vulnerable people in society at a time when they're alone. And, Lisa and Jeffrey, I mean you are keeping our families in this country fed. I mean when everything else shuts down, you are still there. And I just want to thank you for not

only doing these jobs at a time where so many of us are Zooming from home — myself included — but that you're also so willing to share your story to try to make the future for workers across the country better.

So thank you again and really appreciate it.

MR. REID: Thank you too, Molly, as well.

MS. HOPPS: Thank you.

MR. REID: So, you know, I can't withhold honor where honor is due, and trust me, on behalf of me and my fellow essential workers, I want to thank you and I want to thank Brookings Institution for — you know what I mean, highlighting the plight of hardworking American citizens. Man, I really, really, really appreciate all that you all have done for keeping this word out there and getting it — let people know that what's going on out here. I mean thank you as well.

MS. KINDER: Right. Thank you.

MS. HARRIS: Our voices don't get heard without you reporting it, so thank you.

MS. KINDER: Great. Well, thank you for sharing those voices. And Happy Thanksgiving in advance.

MR. REID: You do as well.

(Pre-recorded panel ends)

MS. KINDER: Great, thanks. Now, I recognize we're coming close to our time, so I hope folks can stick around a little bit longer as I introduce Mary Kay Henry, the president of SEIU, who I'm just delighted to finish this conversation with.

Mary Kay Henry is the president of one of the most important unions in this country with 2,000 members. She's always been a tireless advocate for the workers, including Sabrina, who is a long-time member of SEIU, and workers across the country.

I've been really struck by what a leader you've been through this pandemic, raising all of these important issues, from hazard pay to safety to respect to fighting for that living wage permanently. So I'm just delighted to finish this conversation with you.

And I wanted to start — I mean I know one of the best parts of your jobs is that you interact with workers all the time with, you know, Sabrina Hopps of the world. And I'm curious, from what

you just heard in this panel, what resonates with what you're hearing across the country from frontline workers?

MS. HENRY: Thank you, Molly for the incredible work that you're (inaudible) and the report you just issued that put in contrast what these incredible worker leaders were just speaking to, which is how can we live in a society where there is record profits being earned because of the pandemic and what people are required to do. And workers like Lisa and Jeffrey and Sabrina all talking about the terror that they feel going into work every day. And I think that's what resonates with me, both the courage they had in speaking out and telling their story, because that's been our lived experience with our two million members and the millions more fighting for \$15 and a union, and their sober assessment that there's a huge amount of fear still because we've had no federally coordinated response. And I think the shift that Jeffrey talked about from feeling like oh, my god, my job is finally being recognized as essential in this society to then feeling sacrificial, totally resonates with me. And I have to say, Molly, it made me think of the first day of the \$15 and a union demand that fast food workers made, which is when they put their head up and said, hey, we're worth more, we want \$15 and a union.

And unlike what Jeffrey said about oh, I felt so proud to be a grocery worker for the first time in my life, the fast food workers, as they started to raise wages, went from being ridiculed and made fun of people stopping them and asking them for their autographs because raising wages from \$7.25 to \$15 was one of the biggest interventions on racial and economic inequality in our generation. And as you just heard, it just — I don't know about you, it breaks my heart, but it also makes my blood boil when I listen to these stories because they are essential and their work does have value. And the idea that you're working more than full-time in each of their cases I'm sure and can't make ends meet is just wrong. It's un-American. And I just think the Biden-Harris administration has a huge opportunity to intervene on racial and economic inequality, especially in light of how it's landing on communities of color hardest, both in terms of death and in terms of the economic depression and the racial reckoning that the country is trying to wrestle with.

MS. KINDER: Absolutely. And I didn't have the chance to ask Jeffrey, but in the report that we just put out he has a quote talking about the fact that the leadership of his company doesn't look like him, that when you look around at his colleagues at the grocery store, many of them are brown and

black, like he is. But that's not what the leadership looks like. And he talks in very profound terms about the ways in which raising wages helps address this racial reckoning that we're all grappling with. So I'm so pleased to know that, you know, this issue of race should be front and center in our discussions about raising wages.

And just going back to your point, I mean SEIU has been at the forefront of fighting for this \$15 minimum wage. And as you said, when it first started it seemed pie in the sky. And you were saying people were even laughing. And, look, here we are today, where in the last presidential debates the moderator asked, you know, President Trump and Vice President Biden if they supported the \$15 minimum wage and Vice President said yes. And in his transition website, that's one of their defining economic platforms, is raising the wage to \$15 an hour.

I'm just curious, this journey that you've been on, are we here? Has this arrived given what we've just seen from these workers sacrificing so much during the pandemic and the heightened public awareness and gratitude? Are we here? Is this going to happen?

MS. HENRY: Well, we better be. You know, it is a way to really underscore — and President-elect Biden said to me in the corporate and union leader briefing and then afterwards in the press conference, it's time that we move from banging pots, which has been important to celebrate the sacrifices of the frontline essential workers, to actually investing in them. And that's why I'm proud to back our members who've been demanding respect us, protect us, pay us. And it's why our members, Molly, are so excited about the build back better plan that the Biden-Harris administration has put forward, because they are investing in care giving jobs for the first time since the Nation was founded and would really speak to what you heard from Sabrina earlier, which is, yes, registered nurses and physicians have a huge contribution to make to tackling the pandemic, but we really have to deal with the caregivers on the frontlines. And his caregiving economy actually looks at home care providers, which is the fastest growing job in the economy, who are caring for elders and people with disabilities at home, but are making minimum wage with no secure benefits, and many are not eligible for healthcare. And he would transform that job into the foundation of the next most racially diverse middle class by investing and requiring \$15 as a starting wage, secure benefits, the ability of these primarily black, brown, and Asian women to be able to join together in a union and continue to advocate for themselves, their families, their

communities, and the people they serve.

Because one of the things I loved about Sabrina's comment when you said what needs to happen, she didn't think about herself, she thought about the patients. And that's my lived experience with this workforce. There's 2 million women caring for elders and people with disability at home. There's going to be a million more of these jobs just by virtue of the population expansion. And the Biden-Harris administration actually wants to invest in expanding the number of jobs and add another million so that we can reduce the pressure on nursing homes, where there have been many hot spots of the COVID-19 pandemic.

So it's a way to deal with that intersection of racial and economic inequality and beat the virus all at once.

MS. KINDER: Well, Mary Kay, you're speaking my language. We did a report over the summer looking specifically at low-wage essential health workers, including the care workers you're describing, some of them from SEIU's union, and all of them spoke with so much passion about their role, particularly in the pandemic. Without home health workers, many more of the most vulnerable older Americans would have to go into hospitals, they'd be more at risk for COVID and yet they were last in line for any PPE. And we interviewed some home health aides in Virginia making \$8 an hour with no benefits. And so I've also been very heartened to see this big focus on the Biden-Harris administration on these jobs.

And also, that some state governors, when given the choice of how to spend limited Federal dollars on hazard pay, a few states have chosen to raise wages of home health aides. So, in particular, Virginia, Governor Northam, through the work of SEIU, fighting hard for that victory, as well as in Pennsylvania and other states. So I hope that that's a sign that there's a recognition that that is a particular workforce that we see as so essential in the pandemic who has been so neglected and who would benefit from that \$15 minimum wage in so many ways.

MS. HENRY: Yes, exactly. And I just think this is a time when companies, workers, government have to come together because we've seen around the world that when there is focus across civil society, you can tackle the virus and create economic stability. And when people don't come together, we have the out of control situation that we're actually throwing people to the wolves in dealing

with — like we just listened to an El Paso OR tech on our board call this past week who actually said the N95 masks were being distributed based on job and she lost a dear friend in the ER who was the admitting clerk and was not deemed worthy of an N95 mask because he wasn't dealing with the actual patients, but he was exposed to people coming into the ER that we didn't yet know whether they were positive or not. And it's that kind of crazy thinking that has to get punctured here and create a level of safety and protection for all workers across the economy.

MS. KINDER: I agree. And I wish I didn't have a story to relate to that, but one of the workers we met through SEIU, who was this wonderful young mother who was a housekeeper at an operating room and was denied an N95 mask because she was told by the supervisor these are for important people. And that just broke my heart, because she's showing up every day for very low wages, she had young children. And it's that disrespect and that not honoring the humanity of workers that I think is part and parcel of what we're seeing in a lot of lower paid workers being last in line for the PPE and not being respected.

As you said, in the face of billions of dollars in profits, when there is money to share, still not getting access to some of those profits.

But I wonder, you know, there's headwinds and tailwinds in this pandemic, and I wonder if we can come out of this though with society shifting entirely our view of what is essential. I mean this term essential worker means something. And I'm wondering where you see the opportunity. Not just immediately in a policy or a policy perspective, but almost from society. Do you feel that we've change our view of the worthy of essential work and the workers who do it in a way that's going to build longer-term support for some of these changes?

MS. HENRY: I think that we — the shift has been in visibility, Molly. I think we will know whether we've actually changed our views by action. Will we pass a \$15 minimum wage, because it's so common sense? And will the Senate, whatever its makeup, finally unblock the politics of usual and deal with the critical crisis of this time? Are we willing to invest the billions of dollars that you've just exposed in the retail sector in the frontline workforce? And still make a very healthy profit, by the way, you know.

MS. KINDER: Exactly.

MS. HENRY: It's not like we're putting people out of business. It's just a question of are

we prepared to act as a civil society with a social compact that values the frontline workforce. And I think I will be convinced that we've actually shifted views if we can get elected officials to take actions. Because our collective views are what's going to push the Senate, the House to do the right thing. And then cities and states can continue to innovate. But I really believe this is a time for the private sector to come all in. I heard the Microsoft CEO talk about how he did replacement income for the contracted-out workforce, security, janitorial, that we represent in Seattle, because he believed it was the way to create stability for when those workers could safely return to work. Not because he was required by a government worker-employer agreement, but, frankly, he was doing that in other countries around the world that had those rules and it made sense to him. And imagine if we could get that understanding across the private sector as a way for people to stay safely at home, beat the virus, and then return to work without putting their families at risk because they're choosing between their lives and their health and providing an income for their family. And that's just a fool's choice that we shouldn't be placing on any worker in this moment.

And that's what I'm hopeful about, is employers that are willing — you know, Chobani's CEO said recently, I'm going to pay \$15 and I challenge other companies to pay \$15. If that was more of a roll, then the U.S. Senate would just think, okay, well the wave is sweeping the country, let's make it happen.

MS. KINDER: I completely agree. And I should acknowledge that in the report we put out there were a few companies that stood out heads and shoulders above the rest in investing in their workers. So Target and Best Buy were tied for first place for not only giving generous hazard pay, but permanently raising wages to \$15 an hour. Home depot gave very generous hazard pay and is doing some modest permanent pay increases. So while the headlines were overall it was a very disappointing collective of the retail companies, particularly the big ones like Amazon and Walmart, there are examples where companies are not only doing right by their workers, but they're doing phenomenally well. Target had its best quarter on record this past week they announced. So it's possible to do the right thing by your workers and still profit better than you did the year before.

So I do feel hopeful on that.

And I know we're running out of time, Mary Kay, so I just want to end with reflecting on a

little bit of what we heard from Jeffrey, Lisa, and Sabrina and recognizing we're entering the worst phase of the pandemic. So this is not—you know, these workers can't wait for action in Washington, they can't necessarily wait for their employers to turn things around, but they're risking their lives right now.

And I'm wondering from your perspective — I was really struck what Lisa said at the end, her goal is to live through the pandemic. That's her goal. I mean this is life and death for the workers that we're talking about. And, again, as you said, disproportionately brown and black and low-income are facing the worst risks.

What do you think is the biggest priority on that question, on this question of protecting the essential workers through this difficult period before we have a vaccine in play? What would you hope that both the administration and Congress and employers would put their energy?

MS. HENRY: Well, I really hope that we will take aggressive immediate action to get the relief to cities and states, to arm PPE for the essential workers, together with employers. That's the first thing.

The second thing is we think that \$15 minimum wage has to be combined with a right of workers to be able to join together in unions. And you just saw the contrast between these three. And in the meantime, what we're doing is backing workers, whether they're members of our union or not, to join together in their workplaces and talk with their supervisors, their store managers, their warehouse superintendents, to address the key issues that workers are facing in this moment.

And so we really think that at the federal, state, and local level, and together with employers like Home Depot and Target, the way they can make those jobs secure jobs is to allow workers to join unions and to collectively bargain and partner with the employer to make sure they have the highest public health and safety measures in place, but also the best customer service and satisfaction.

MS. KINDER: Well, I just second that. One of my big takeaways from talking to so many frontline workers is that what the workers share with me about what it means to be in a union during a pandemic is so powerful. And, you know, there's even now evidence that suggests that nursing homes that are unionized have lower death rates during COVID. So I think there's plenty of reasons why the work you're doing to make sure all workers in their workplace have a voice and have the ability to



organize is just so critical.

Mary Kay Henry, thank you so much for taking the time out of I know a very busy schedule where you're in so much demand. We appreciate hearing your reflections and your priorities and your call to action. And I wish you the very best for a happy Thanksgiving and thank you for all your work.

MS. HENRY: Thank you, Molly. And thank you for the work of Brookings in shining a light on this and helping with the discourse so that across American we can come together in the pandemic, get economic recovery, deal with our racial reckoning. I'm really confident and optimistic that together we can make anything happen in this Nation.

MS. KINDER: Great. Thanks, Mary Kay. I love the optimism. So thank you again. I really appreciate it.

MS. HENRY: Thank you.

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