

# Congress of the United States

## House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND GOVERNMENT REFORM

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### Opening Statement Ranking Member Elijah E. Cummings Hearing on “Federal Employee Compensation: An Update” May 18, 2017

At today’s hearing, we will review the compensation of federal workers compared to the compensation of workers in the private sector.

The Congressional Budget Office (CBO) recently issued a report on this topic, and it provides a lot of detailed information. Not surprisingly, the CBO report shows that some federal workers make more than their private sector colleagues, while others make less.

Unfortunately, I fear that my Republican colleagues will try to use this report to argue that we are paying federal employees too much. And then they may try to use this hearing as a basis to continue attacking the pay and benefits of federal workers.

That is exactly the wrong lesson to draw from this report. The real lesson for today’s hearing is not that middle class federal workers are making too much. It is that private sector workers—especially those with the lowest incomes and educations—are making too little.

Over the past several decades, the productivity of American workers has grown higher than ever before. At the same time, corporations, shareholders, and CEOs have been exploiting these workers and hoarding more and more of the wealth that these workers produce.

From 1979 to 2013, the total income for the top 1% of households grew by an astonishing 188%. But over the exact same timeframe, total income for the bottom 80% of households grew by a paltry 18%.

It is not just wages that are stagnating. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that inequality in total compensation is worsening even more rapidly than wages alone. In other words, inequality is getting even worse when we take into account health insurance, retirement and savings plans, paid leave, and disability and life insurance.

When we examine the lowest quarter of wage earners, nearly 60% had no access to paid sick leave. Nearly 70% had no access to employer-provided medical care as of March 2016.

Yet, Republicans refuse to help these workers. For years, they have refused to allow Congress to vote on Democratic legislation to raise the minimum wage. The minimum wage is only \$7.25 per hour, and it has not been raised in eight years.

At the same time, Republicans keep attacking federal workers. They forced new federal employees to pay more for their retirement benefits in 2012 and 2013, and now they are threatening to take away their pensions. They want to follow the lead of private sector corporations in eliminating traditional defined benefit plans in exchange for less generous 401k style plans. And they cloak these cuts in the language of “reform.”

The truth is that this will hurt their own constituents. This will hurt nearly 8,000 federal workers with only high school diplomas who live in Kentucky, 18,000 federal workers with high school diplomas in Georgia, and 31,000 federal workers with high school diplomas in Texas.

We should be trying to lift up all workers—including both middle class federal workers and low-income private sector workers. I hope to ask our witnesses today how best to do that.

With that, I would like to offer special thanks to Jaqueline Simon, the Public Policy Director of the American Federation of Government Employees. She agreed to testify at our request under extremely short notice, and we thank her tremendously for being here.

Related to that, Mr. Chairman, I want to note my very strong objection to this Committee’s refusal to allow Senator Bernie Sanders to testify here today. I submitted my request for Senator Sanders to testify last week. And my request was denied for no reason other than certain Republicans on our Committee claiming that Senator Sanders is “not qualified” to testify about the challenges facing workers in our nation.

Of course, that’s ridiculous. Senator Sanders is a champion of workers’ rights, and he is a nationally renowned expert on these matters.

This is not the first time this Committee has refused to invite a witness we requested. Chairman Issa refused our request to invite Sandra Fluke because he claimed she was “not qualified” to speak about issues affecting women, such as birth control.

However, this is the first time that I can remember when the Committee has tried to silence a United States Senator, who is also a former member of this esteemed body. He certainly deserved more respect than he was given, and I extend my apologies to him for the way he was treated.

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