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Democratic Party Must Commit to a Fair Workplace *NOW-NYC VP of Legislation Noreen Connell Urges DNC Support of Fair Pay Restoration Act*

Good evening. Thank you for holding this hearing. My name is Noreen Connell, and I am the former president of NOW-NYS and I am also on the board of directors of the Workers Defense League (WDL), an organization that assists individuals seeking Unemployment Insurance, Workers' Compensation, and Disability benefits. The focus of my comments are related to employment.

There is an urgent need for a strong commitment in the Democratic Party Platform to once again enforce standards for a fair workplace in America. Last week the Government Accountability Office released two reports documenting the reduction of enforcement actions by the Wage and Hour Division of the Department of Labor against overtime and minimum-wage violations, especially in low-income industries. Congressman George Miller is quoted in the July 15th *New York Times* as saying, "...Wage theft is only getting worse because of weaker enforcement."

This is not an esoteric issue affecting just a few individuals in marginal industries. This spring I spent many Sunday afternoons phone banking primary voters in Ohio and Pennsylvania. About a third of the individuals I was able to engage in a conversation mentioned an employment-related problem. I was shocked. I always knew that the complaints received by NOW and the WDL were the tip of the iceberg, but this informal survey of primary voters in swing states revealed how extensive the problem is of lower wages and questionable practices in the workplace. Fair and honest employers are also put at a competitive disadvantage when there is a lack of enforcement against wage violations.

Because of woefully inadequate reporting by the major media, most of the public does not understand that the U.S. Supreme Court majority decision in *Lilly Ledbetter v. Goodyear Tire* gutted the Equal Pay Act and Title VII prohibitions against wage discrimination. For thirty years, individuals could file complaints within six months of their last paycheck. Now they must do so within six months of their first paycheck, during a period of initial employment when they are less likely to know the wages of their co-workers. The Democratic Party Platform must include strong support for the Fair Pay Restoration Act, which was narrowly defeated by Republicans in the Senate this year.

This plank must not be just rhetoric. There should be a clear, unambiguous statement that funding and staffing of enforcement agencies be increased. It is an open question as to when a Democratic administration will be able to reverse the Bush economic crisis — which has left so many millions of wage earners vulnerable to abusive practices. Voters need to know that the Democratic Party will fight for a fair workplace in tandem with efforts to restore the economic health of this nation.