

HB 1506 (Senn) – Addressing workplace practices to achieve gender pay equity

Testimony by Lynne Dodson, Secretary Treasurer, Washington State Labor Council, AFL-CIO

Thank you, Chair Sells, thanks also to Representative Senn and Doglio, members of the committee, all those who signed onto HB 1506, and those who voted for equal pay every year for the past four years.

If you are breathing, I don't think you can miss the urgency of the call for change that is in our state and nation right now. I was watching the Golden Globes last night – what truly struck me, besides Oprah's powerful words, was how all these powerful women (and men) are stepping up, not only to tell their own stories, their sisters stories, their mothers stories, they weren't just talking about individual struggles, they were talking about their collective, our collective, responsibility to step up and support those who don't have positions of power.

As lawmakers, you must recognize that you are in a position to change the dynamic that has existed for far too long, the discrimination that persists, the economic instability that makes women more vulnerable to harassment and abuse. HB 1506 is not a panacea – it isn't going to tear down that wall of sexism.

Personally, I prefer the bill as it was written years ago, with unlimited look backs, triple damages, and stronger job opportunities language – and there are members of the labor community who feel strongly that those are the standards we should be setting statewide. That said, we also recognize that legislation requires compromise, and the key is recognizing some of the factors that perpetuate unequal pay, providing protections and relief, and leaving the space for improvement at the local level. The amendments heard today builds on our core values.

HB1506 amendments provide strong protections for workers to talk about pay; it offers flexible avenues for administrative remedies and access to the courts, it ensures workers have access to justice, including low cost access, and timely relief. The 4 year recovery period allows for more substantive relief for low wage workers and I am glad that employers will have the opportunity to consider and revise advertising and recruitment for career advancement and tracking in ways that can help address one of the root causes of discrimination and lifelong pay disparity.

This legislation has been a long time coming, and it's good that Washington state is finally moving forward. We cannot be complacent, however – this bill will not end unequal pay for women in our state. Local jurisdictions, including those that suffer from the most gender pay inequality, must be able to surpass the floor that this legislation provides, and come up with policy solutions that fit their regions. This is a good start, and provides a minimum labor standard for the state, but further change is guaranteed. Local governments must be able to react to that change quickly and to pass laws that reflect solutions for their regions.

While many members of our coalition would like this bill to be stronger, we respect the hard work, compromise, and principled positions that brought 1506 here. It's a good bill, it's looong overdue, and should be passed as it stands and moved swiftly into law. Thank you.