

**Testimony of
Veronica Puentes
Before the
U.S. Senate Committee on the Budget
Hearing on Reducing Inequality, Fueling Growth: How Public Investment Promotes
Prosperity for All
September 20, 2023**

Good morning Chairman Whitehouse, Ranking Member Grassley, and members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. My name is Veronica Puentes and I am an Assembly Technician at New Flyer in Crookston, Minnesota. I have seven children and I am a grandmother of four beautiful grandchildren. I am a union steward, elected member of the Executive Board and member of the Communications Workers of America (CWA) Local 7304. But most importantly, I am a child of God.

I have worked at New Flyer for twelve years. At my facility, we manufacture electric buses and I am proud of the work that I do. I have worked in multiple positions during my time at the facility, gaining experience installing interior cameras, headsets, handsets, exterior lights, handles and more. I am currently in the finish department, where I assist with any last minute issues before the finished electric bus is sent to the quality inspectors and shipped to its final destination.

My life has not always been easy. My parents were migrant farm workers and traveled between Crystal City, Texas to East Grand Forks, Minnesota for their work. My parents separated when I was ten years old, devastating my younger siblings and I. I became a mother and struggled with addiction issues at a young age. I headed down a destructive path and ultimately ended up serving two years at Minnesota Correctional Facility. During that time, I made a promise to god and myself to turn my life around. I enrolled myself in programs to build a deeper relationship with Christ and build the social and technical skills required to earn a living for myself and my family when released. Finding a good paying stable job was the first step to turn my life around.

Upon my release, I quickly began looking for work and found a job as a housekeeper. The low pay and lack of benefits meant I struggled to make ends meet. Unfortunately, my situation was not unsurprising nor unique. It is often very difficult for returning citizens to find housing, obtain a job and achieve a basic standard of living, which makes it even harder to stay on the right track.

I was fortunate enough to land a job at New Flyer and I owe it all to God and our union. Our union has been instrumental in providing me with a second chance. It does not matter who you

are, they will help you out regardless of background and give you a fair chance. Many employers do not hire returning citizens, but our union enforces a non-discrimination policy when hiring, ensuring they are given a chance to interview and be hired. I went from making \$8.50 an hour as a housekeeper to \$13 an hour when I started at New Flyer in 2011. With the regular wage increases in our union contract, I was able to start a savings account, begin to pay off my debt, and eventually buy a car and house. Most importantly, it gave me a chance at stability for once in my life.

Our contract also guarantees new hires receive benefits immediately after hiring, without any probationary period. Once I was hired, I had access to healthcare, paid leave, retirement savings and benefits I could never have possibly imagined acquiring previously. It made getting my life back on track that much easier.

I am a prime example of how unions can be a life-changing opportunity for someone struggling to get by. Unions are key to providing workplace benefits, healthcare, and increased earning potential for not only returning citizens, but all those in marginalized communities.

As Congress debates funding our government and how to responsibly manage the budget, it is important to continue the critical investments made through the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) and the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) because so many are benefiting from the good union jobs created by the investments from these laws.

In years past, we were concerned that our facility would shut down due to a lack of investment and production. Those moments were stressful. It would be extremely difficult for me to secure a job with a good wage, benefits, workplace protections and a long term career path because of my background. And the reality is that union manufacturing jobs like mine provide better pay and benefits than are available anywhere else in Crookston.

The success of the facility is not only crucial to the well being of my family, it is essential to the community in which it resides. Our facility employs about 300 workers in Crookston. Crookston is a small rural town with a population of a little under 7,500. Individuals come from all over to work at New Flyer so that they can provide for their families. If the facility were to shut down, not only would it hurt individual workers and their families, it would devastate the local community with job losses and loss of financial revenue and investment.

Thanks to the incentives and investments provided by the IIJA and IRA, our facility has been busy filling orders for electric buses for transportation systems across the country and workers no longer stress about losing their jobs. The increased demand for electric buses means we are experiencing a high volume of job openings at the facility, enabling more workers to benefit from the higher union wages, benefits and standards our facility provides.

The investments from the IIJA and IRA will help state and local governments make the transition to electric buses in order to reduce air pollution. Heavy duty vehicles, like buses, make up nearly one-quarter of all U.S. transportation greenhouse gas emissions. The IRA provides numerous grants and tax credits that make it easier for state and local governments to invest in electric buses. The IIJA includes \$5 billion for state and local governments to purchase or lease zero-emission and low-emission transit buses. The Low or No Emission Grant Program improves local air quality and expands affordable, accessible, transportation options in communities across the country by helping state and local governments purchase U.S.-built electric transit buses and other cleaner models.

The transition to clean renewable energy is not without its hardships and challenges, but we must overcome them in order to create a sustainable future. Our facility has not been immune to the chip shortage affecting the manufacturing industry. But the passage of the CHIPS and Science Act took steps to secure our semiconductor supply chains, ensure a steady supply of chips and provide protections for workers in the industry by ensuring the jobs created are good union jobs.

The world is changing and technology is evolving. Companies must adapt if they want to remain competitive. And luckily, New Flyer is embracing new technologies because of the IIJA and IRA.

We have the opportunity to create a sustainable future with good union jobs and ensure professionally trained workers are leading the way. I planned to stay at New Flyer for a year after I started, but I have stayed for so long because I would not want to work at another non-union facility. We have a voice on the job, maintain a good work-life balance, and receive the best wages and benefits in the area because of our union. And our union holds New Flyer accountable when things go wrong.

I became involved in our union because one of my coworkers was sexually harassed at the facility and management was doing nothing about it. I took it upon myself to become an advocate and work with our union to move my colleague's case forward. Witnessing how supportive our union was and how much of a difference it made in handling the case was all I needed to get involved. I wanted to share and give not only to New Flyer but to my union what the Good Lord blessed me with. I have dedicated my life to helping others and it was clear that if I wanted to make life better for those around me, I needed to get involved in my union.

Research shows supporting workers' right to organize is a key way to boost workers wages, support quality jobs and reduce income inequality and racial economic disparities. Black and Hispanic workers get an especially large boost from unionization. Unions are not only beneficial to their members, they raise wages and standards for non-unionized employees in the same

industry. And it's more than the monetary benefits, unions provide greater workplace protections for workers.

Without the security my union has afforded me, it would not have been possible to build the life I have today. Others, especially those in marginalized communities, should be afforded the same opportunity I have been given. It is important that Congress support policies that create good union jobs and protect workers' right to organize like the Protecting the Right to Organize (PRO) Act. Most workers have the right to organize under the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA), but are frequently unable to do so in practice because of the NLRA's weak accountability measures for employers who intimidate or fire workers who exercise their rights. The PRO Act would help correct this power imbalance and ensure that these investments are tied to good union jobs in small communities like mine and other underserved areas across the country.

Simultaneously, Congress must provide sufficient funding to the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) to lift the agency out of its budget and funding crisis and enable more workers to join a union. Although the increase in funding included in the 2022 December omnibus package will allow the NLRB to continue its critical operations and prevent furloughs, the Board still remains understaffed after almost a decade of flat funding. Chronic understaffing at the agency puts a strain on the Board and regional staff, especially as they have seen an increase in filings for union elections and unfair labor practices in the last several years.

An underfunded and understaffed NLRB is disastrous for workers who rely on the agency to fairly oversee their efforts to unionize and hold employers accountable for violating their rights. Workers do not have the luxury to wait long periods for a decision to be made by an underfunded and understaffed NLRB. Workers will not be willing to take the risk to organize if they know there is going to be delayed justice when a company purposely breaks the law or if their union election is dragged out.

I am disheartened by the Republicans budget proposal to cut funding to vital worker protection agencies, like the NLRB. The Republican's current Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies appropriation bill includes a thirty-three percent cut to the NLRB. Such a drastic cut would cancel out the progress made last year and leave the NLRB worse off -- resulting in immediate layoffs and dragging out the time needed to hold elections and decide unfair labor practice charges. Instead, Congress should enact President Biden's proposal and include \$376 million to the NLRB for fiscal year 2024 in the appropriation packages. Increased funding for the NLRB will allow the agency to process petitions and conduct elections, investigate unfair labor charges, and obtain full remedies for workers whose labor rights have been violated.

Instead of cutting these investments or slashing the budget of vital worker protection agencies that aid in creating good jobs, Congress should close the tax loopholes that undermine good jobs and offshore work. Enacting legislation like No Tax Breaks for Union Busting or No Tax Breaks for Outsourcing would generate revenue and ensure our taxpayer dollars are not used to subsidize employer intimidation and bullying tactics of union busting or incentivize companies to move good paying jobs overseas in order to slash their tax bill.

It is not enough to create jobs, Congress must ensure that all jobs created through federal investment are union jobs that will provide workers with a good quality of life. The future of the economy is green jobs and **is union jobs**.

Electric buses made with union labor are the future of transportation in America. I am proud of the work I do to create a sustainable, clean public transportation fleet for all Americans. I am modernizing transportation systems that connect people to their schools, work, their loved ones -- all while reducing the air pollution that has long plagued our communities. Millions of people in the United States depend on us to make sure that the buses they ride are reliable and safe.

Our union leaders who have been around for longer remember when we were helping with the transition to hybrid buses and now years later, we are helping with the transition to electric buses. Producing more sustainable transit that is in high demand because of the investments from the IIJA and IRA guarantees our facility will thrive for years to come. And if our facility prospers, Crookston will continue to flourish as well.

God bless America for the Lord knows we are one nation under God. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify before you today. I look forward to any questions you may have.