

Preliminary Budget Hearing
Committee on Consumer Affairs
New York City Council
March 6, 2017

Remarks by Sally Alvarez, Cornell ILR Worker Institute

Thank you for the opportunity to speak here today.

My name is Sally Alvarez and I work for Cornell University in the School of Industrial and Labor Relations here in the city. At the ILR School, we have an Institute focused on workers' rights and working conditions called the Worker Institute. We conduct research, training, and advocacy in partnership with a wide variety of organizations including unions, worker centers and other groups assisting low-wage workers such as day laborers, restaurant workers, and domestic workers. I'm here today because we have been involved in an area of work that I believe is of central concern to the Committee, the Council, and to New York City as a whole.

We have been conducting research on the workforce in the arts and entertainment industry, with a focus on younger, early-career workers. Coming out of that research, we are currently incubating a project that we believe will significantly benefit this workforce.

We commend the City Council, the Speaker, and the Mayor for setting up the new Office of Labor Policy and Standards, which is a tremendous step forward in recognizing and addressing the problems of the city's workforce, particularly low-wage and gig-economy workers. This Office is an important resource for those in the early stages of their arts career. We are especially pleased that the new "Freelance is Not Free" legislation will be implemented in May under this office, which will affect many of the workers in this industry.

We too often assume that young workers in arts and entertainment should be on their way to privileged middle class status. Aren't most of them highly educated and skilled? Isn't this an industry that has recognized the need to address diversity issues? Isn't this an industry that is robust and profitable, a driver of New York's economy? Isn't it highly unionized? Our research has established that the truth is more complex. Changes in technology and culture, along with the rapid restructuring of the business of arts and entertainment have made work for many, workers dangerous, unstable, low-paid or unpaid, and insecure.

Newer and emerging segments of the industry like videogame production, independent film, reality TV, and live, immersive theater are where many young workers get their start, but these

are among the most exploitative, unsafe, and non-unionized jobs. Wage theft, overtime violations, misclassification, unsafe conditions, and theft of intellectual property are only a few of the issues we've encountered in our research. Young workers don't know their rights, and the industry is so competitive, they fear they'll never work again if they speak up.

In response to this situation, Cornell's Worker Institute is partnering with other art support organizations and unions to create an Arts and Entertainment Worker Resource Center. The Center will aggregate and provide resources, information, and community for these young workers across the arts, television and film, fashion, and media industries. We look forward to partnering with the Department, the Committee, and the new Office of Labor and Policy Standards to address issues facing the arts and entertainment workforce.

We wanted to take this opportunity to bring the needs of this particular segment of the workforce to your attention, and to express our hope that Cornell and the Council, through the DCA, can partner in supporting this new initiative. We are sending you each materials about the project and hope to sit down with each of you to explain its value to the city in more detail. We have applied for discretionary funding from the Council for the next fiscal year, and we hope there will be an opportunity to discuss eventually creating a joint initiative to protect this important segment of New York's vulnerable workforce.

Thank you very much for your attention and consideration.