

# People's Report on Trade and Inequality

Prepared by the Washington Fair Trade Coalition, 2025

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## 1. Executive Summary

This report reflects testimony gathered during the 2025 People's Hearing on Trade and Inequality. This independent hearing was organized by the Washington Fair Trade Coalition after the Trump administration canceled a previously-scheduled U.S. International Trade Commission (USITC) investigation on the distributional impacts of trade, including cancelling multiple events designed to collect testimony as to how U.S. trade policy disproportionately impacts people based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, disability, age, education level and other factors. In response to the cancellation, communities across Washington and beyond gathered to share the lived realities of trade policy from the ground up.

### Core findings include:

Existing, corporate-driven U.S. trade policy has led to:

- Widespread job loss and offshoring in industrial and other sectors
- Wage stagnation and union suppression
- Increased economic displacement and forced migration
- Environmental degradation tied to trade infrastructure and deregulation
- The expansion of Big Tech monopolies and erosion of digital rights through trade rules that undermine privacy, AI accountability, and the right to repair
- Disproportionate harm to communities of color, immigrants, and women and queer workers including:
  - Fewer safety nets: Women, queer, immigrant, and BIPOC workers often lack generational wealth or savings to recover from trade-related job loss.
  - Wage suppression: Trade-driven wage decline hits lowest-paid workers hardest—especially women of color, queer, and undocumented workers.
  - Scapegoating: Migrant and racialized communities are blamed for economic harm caused by trade deals, fueling racism and xenophobia.
  - Environmental racism: Trade policies concentrate pollution and resource extraction in communities of color, worsening health and displacement.
  - Gendered austerity impacts: Cuts to public services hit women and queer people hardest, especially those in caregiving roles.
  - Deepened inequities: Trade-related job loss, housing instability, and healthcare cuts compound harm in BIPOC and LGBTQ+ communities.

### Key recommendations:

- Center labor and environmental rights enforcement in all trade agreements, including in the upcoming USMCA Review renegotiation
  - End special giveaways for corporate interest groups, including “digital trade” rules for Big Tech and pharmaceutical monopolies for Big Pharma, that disproportionately harm communities of color and women
  - Require meaningful public input and community consultation in all trade negotiations
  - Ensure trade policies support climate, racial, and gender justice
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## **2. Introduction**

In early 2025, the Trump administration continued its pattern of attacks on working people, migrants, and the planet by abruptly canceling a long-overdue investigation into the unequal impacts of trade policy. This decision was more than bureaucratic—it was a deliberate effort to silence the voices of communities most harmed by our trade rules and to shield corporate interests from public scrutiny.

In response, the Washington Fair Trade Coalition convened a People’s Hearing on Trade and Inequality to ensure those voices would still be heard. Dozens of union members, migrant justice advocates, environmental leaders, public health workers, and impacted community members from across the country testified. The hearing made clear that trade policy isn’t just about economic numbers—it’s about lives, communities, and the urgent need for justice.

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## **3. Trade Policy in the U.S.: A Brief Primer**

For decades, trade agreements like NAFTA, the USMCA, and the WTO framework have prioritized corporate profit over people and the planet. Crafted behind closed doors with outsized influence from corporate lobbyists and minimal input from workers, frontline communities, or civil society, these deals have entrenched inequality, eroded labor protections, and undermined democratic governance.

This trend continues today. So-called “digital trade” rules are being weaponized to shield Big Tech from regulation, undermining privacy rights, AI accountability, and consumer protections. Meanwhile, critical minerals agreements—negotiated with little transparency—threaten to fast-track environmental degradation and perpetuate exploitative resource extraction in the name of a clean energy transition.

Trade isn’t a side issue—it touches every major fight for justice. From labor rights and climate action to immigrant justice, public health, and democracy itself, trade rules shape the terrain we’re all organizing on.

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## 4. Key Themes from the Hearing

### A. Job Losses and Labor Rights Violations

Speakers shared powerful testimony on how trade agreements like NAFTA and the USMCA have led to widespread job losses, weakened labor protections, and deepened inequality in communities across North America and beyond.

Phila Back spoke about the decline of manufacturing in Reading, Pennsylvania — once a major industrial city:

“Between 1974 and 2009, [Reading] lost 15,000 manufacturing jobs, with over 11,000 certified Trade Adjustment Assistance recipients to date.”

In 1990, Reading’s poverty rate was 26.8%. After NAFTA and the collapse of its industrial base, that rate rose to 41.3% by 2011, prompting *The New York Times* to call it the poorest city in the country.

John Claasen, a former unionized broom factory owner, shared the devastating impact of NAFTA on his industry:

“[NAFTA] totally killed the whole industry, and there are no broom factories left of any size in the U.S.”

Betsy Zucker, from Portland, Oregon, described how 200 union jobs at a pulp and paper mill were lost, not due to local conditions but to foreign trade policies:

“Those jobs were lost... for reasons that really had nothing to do with the community, but had to do with our foreign trade policies that prioritize everything but people’s values and jobs... They will never replace that kind of good union job in a small community in suburban-slash-rural Oregon.”

Nicholas Matson, a 5th-generation Longshore worker in the Port of Astoria in Washington State, described the long history of his family’s work on the Astoria waterfront, noting that,

“There is no end to where a corporation will go to select workers. If the proper regulations are not in place, they’ll go anywhere – they’ll displace anyone from any native land anywhere to do it cheaper.”

Nicholas went on to describe the devastating impacts of Trump’s first round of tariffs, reminding us that his family has been working at the Port of Astoria for 5 generations:

“The first four years of the Trump administration arrives... What became of his first round of tariffs ended log exports in the port of Astoria for the first time in all those generations.”

Next, John Pfannestein, president of AFGE Local 3937 discussed the gutting of the Social Security Administration under Trump's so-called "Department of Government Efficiency" (DOGE), led by Elon Musk:

"We've gone from 10 regions down to 4. Entire departments, including our Office of Civil Rights and Equal Opportunity, which handles EEO complaints for employees facing discrimination, were dissolved... Those employees were placed on 30 days administrative leave pending termination."

"The Acting Commissioner has stated publicly that he wants to reduce our workforce by 7,000 employees. We are assisting more clientele than ever before with fewer employees than at any point in the last 50 years... Social Security is being destroyed from within in an effort to move toward privatization."

And in response to DOGE's allegation of waste, fraud, and abuse, John clarified that in his 17-year career, he "had only one fraud case," and that in "any private sector benefits, you will find fraud way higher than that." He noted,

"The people at DOGE have no understanding of how our agency operates – nor are they interested in understanding it. They believe that social security is a failure. And that the only way to save it is to break it [by moving] towards privatization, because we have a 2.7 trillion dollars surplus that is sitting there in our trust fund, and the millionaires and billionaires aren't profiting off of it. So they can't directly attack the program. They cannot eliminate social security, but they can destroy it from within."

John finished by outlining the dangers of gutting Social Security:

"If Social Security goes down, we are all in a huge amount of trouble, economically. The people who will suffer the most are vulnerable communities—the disabled, the elderly, the indigenous—who cannot afford to lose this lifeline, just because the rich want to make a profit off of our earned benefits and the taxes that we've paid our entire working careers."

Jesse Lenney, a former Xerox engineer turned union organizer, described the collapse of unionized manufacturing in Rochester, New York:

"The employment went from about 1,200... here in Rochester...to, you know, dozens 15 years later."

Based on conversations with workers from several different workplaces in various industries, Jesse noted how trade policy impacts union bargaining:

"International pressures affected how much workers were willing to demand during negotiations."

Clara Duffy, from the Women's Institute for Solidarity and Empowerment (WISE), spoke about working in a hospital and witnessing the systemic deprioritization of essential services and staff:

“Institutions are just being deprioritized... things that are helping to ensure that people are getting their basic needs met...[Workers] in food service as well as the custodians or environmental services, we’re the lowest paid at the hospital, but we’re also necessary to keeping the hospital running.”

Clayton Tucker, a rancher and the Secretary of the Texas Farmers Union, spoke to the collapse of family farming due to corporate-driven trade deals:

“These trade deals have been great for Big Ag... but if you haven’t been Tyson, they’ve been detrimental. And once farmers go, rural communities go. It has a domino effect”.

Clayton made the point that this is not just detrimental for American farmers:

“And not just the American family farmer—it’s also the Mexican family farmers. I’m certain the Canadian family farmers have taken a hit too”.

And the impact on farmers ripples through the community. Big Ag is making profits “while charging everyone else higher costs for food, as well as providing less quality food.”

Karl Kramer, from the San Francisco Living Wage Coalition, highlighted how global trade policies drive wages down:

“Wages are very fungible...Capital flows to those sectors of the economy that have the highest rate of return, that have the highest profits, and that’s based on the wages being driven down to the lowest possible.”

Karl tells a story of maquiladora workers in Ciudad Juarez, where in the 18 years after NAFTA was implemented, the minimum wage in Mexico has gone from the equivalent of 5 US dollars to 4 US dollars. It has already lost 25% of its value.

A participant highlighted the importance of the USMCA:

“The ongoing USMCA negotiations decide the next 16 years of trade policy. What we do now, or fail to do, will impact the foreseeable future. Families and their livelihoods, community prosperity, and our beautiful earth are some of the many things we can expect to be impacted by such a wide-reaching, multi-national trade deal.”

## **B. Impacts on Migrant Communities and Root Causes of Displacement**

Participants discussed the role of trade policy in driving migration and the harmful effects of U.S. economic policies on migrant communities. They highlighted how policies contribute to displacement and the exploitation of migrant workers.

Jessica Valdez of WISE shared how Trump's incoherent trade policy impacts workers abroad, with a case study specifically in the Philippines:

"We're seeing these tariffs and these trade agreements being used as bargaining chips, basically for more control and more influence in other home countries of migrants like the Philippines...8,000 Filipinos leave the Philippines every day to find work abroad, because there are not enough jobs that pay enough to make ends meet back home."

Jessica further goes on to tell the story of one of these migrants, a woman detained for years at the Northwest Detention Center, despite chronic health issues, after migrating from the Philippines to support her family:

"She has diabetes and a benign brain tumor... She's been begging for medical attention, only to be turned away with ibuprofen".

Jessica connected U.S. trade agreements and resource extraction abroad directly to forced migration:

"As trade agreements and economic policies worsen in home countries, we'll see even greater migration abroad—but also increasing scrutiny and anti-migrant policies here".

Clara Duffy, also of WISE, described how sanctions and trade policy in Venezuela, Angola, and the Congo are driving asylum seekers to Washington:

"We're working with migrant women who are experiencing dire conditions here in the U.S. after escaping dire conditions in their home countries... People are being forced to migrate to different places because they have lost their economic sovereignty."

Clara goes on to state the conditions that a lot of these migrant women are facing once they are in Washington State:

"It's really a matter of not having a dignified livelihood... A lack of food security, and a lot of having to jump around from place to place to be able to have stable housing... They're really living out of hotels, or some are even still living in encampments at different churches that are able to house them, and in the last few years, this crisis has really escalated in the State."

Maya Morales of Washington People's Privacy made the explicit connection between trade policy, immigration, and labor:

"We've seen these visa programs that are very exploitative and just sort of yank workers over for a minute, exploit their labor, treat them poorly, and give them pretty bad living conditions."

### **C. Environmental Harm and Climate Injustice**

Speakers underscored how current trade policies drive environmental degradation by enabling extractive industries and weakening environmental protections. The discussion connected these harms to global inequality and forced migration — and emphasized the urgency of demanding stronger environmental standards in trade agreements.

Jessica Valdez illustrated the global dynamics of extractive trade, using the Philippines as a powerful example:

“A lot of what is produced on the ground in the Philippines is not for the benefit of Filipino people, but for multinational corporations.”

She pointed to how this model fuels resource depletion and displacement, contributing to broader patterns of climate injustice and migration.

Karl Kramer called for proactive movement-building in response to these threats:

“We need to build up a movement around the review of the U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement, and demand to have... protections for the environment strengthened.”

### **D. Racial and Gender Justice**

Participants emphasized that trade and economic policies have disproportionately harmful effects on communities of color, women, and LGBTQ+ individuals—both within the U.S. and globally. These voices highlighted how structural inequalities are deepened by trade agreements and neoliberal austerity measures.

Taylor Farley of Queer Power Alliance emphasized that Washington’s LGBTQ+ community is already facing a crisis of displacement:

“With the tariffs, rising prices, and job losses, housing is becoming a scarcity. Our community is paying 30% more toward housing than the general population. Health care is tied to employment—and employment is disappearing.”

Taylor spoke to the compounded impact of trade policy and economic austerity on trans people of color:

“We know that when the most marginalized person, which is a Black trans woman, is struggling, then the rest of the community is struggling too.”

Donna Denina of the International Women’s Alliance described how global trade systems exploit and endanger women, especially in the Global South. She noted a trend of funneling women—many of whom are from rural areas with limited access to formal education—into tech and informal sectors with little protection or job security.

She detailed the case of maquiladora factories in Mexican border cities, where trade policies have left women workers particularly vulnerable:

“Another sort of statistic to look at are the high rates of femicide among women along border cities. Many of the maquiladora workers are women. And while the USMCA claims to provide better protections, governments fail to safeguard these women outside of the factory—where they are vulnerable to kidnapping, trafficking, and even murder.”

Donna pointed specifically to Ciudad Juarez:

“It’s one of the concentrations of these factories, where 70% of the products go to the U.S. market. And at one point, Ciudad Juarez was considered the most murderous city in the entire world. So we must look at how these trade policies intersect with violence against women.”

Jessica Valdez spoke to the risks Indigenous communities face from extractive economic policies, including pipeline projects:

“The pipelines may bring local jobs, but historically, they’ve also brought increased violence, especially against Indigenous women. We’ve seen rises in sex trafficking, illicit drugs, and assaults in connection with pipeline construction on Indigenous land.”

Another participant addressed the racialized economic harm of offshoring:

“The offshoring of jobs devastates local communities. As unemployment numbers rise, communities fracture... Black and Hispanic communities, on average, have less household savings and generational wealth, which amplifies the pain.”

They emphasized that the logic of trade policy pits workers in different countries against one another:

“Corporations send jobs abroad to exploit low wages and sweatshop conditions. We need to protect all working-class communities. The status quo is a lose-lose for people both inside and outside the United States.”

## **E. Big Tech and Digital Trade**

During the event, participants discussed the role of trade agreements in deregulating Big Tech, highlighting the broader impacts on privacy, workers' rights, and migration. Maya Morales of WA People’s Privacy emphasized the risks of insufficient regulation in digital trade agreements, especially in terms of data privacy and worker power.

Maya explained how the absence of privacy protections in digital trade deals weakens both worker power and personal rights:



“Companies can just suck in people’s data with no guardrails...It's sometimes hard to connect the dots between digital trade agreements and how we are locally using our devices. But essentially, when we don't have any guardrails on the way that Big tech can make agreements around our privacy or the way they want to use our data, we really lose a lot of power, and in many cases that's worker power. But it also can just be our ability to utilize our rights. And to decide how people's digital lives should be conducted.”

She also linked the digital trade issue to other social issues, such as migrant and worker rights, highlighting the role data plays in facilitating harmful actions like raids. Maya highlighted a specific raid on roofers in Whatcom County, WA:

“It was either 37, or 40 workers were literally just abducted and taken and detained. [These workers] really hugely contribute to our community. I mean, they literally fix everybody's roofs... And many of those raids are being facilitated with the use of data that our government is getting access to through commercial apps and data brokers.”

Maya further pointed out that digital trade impacts every aspect of society, from housing and goods pricing to education, urging the need for a greater voice for the people:

“It affects every aspect of our lives as well. From housing to the price of goods to the way that trade happens to our ports, to our immigration dynamics, everything. Even education, right? There are a lot of issues happening with education right now, and technology. And a lot of parents upset and a lot of teachers upset.”

In closing, Maya called for action, stressing the importance of people, not just corporations, having a say in decisions that impact their lives:

“Ultimately, it's the people that make a nation, not a few billionaire companies... We all deserve to have our voices in the places where these decisions are made. And so that would be my call to action.”

## **F. Access to Medicine and Big Pharma**

The discussion highlighted the significant impact of trade policies on access to affordable medicine, particularly in how they prioritize corporate profits over public health needs.

Betsy Zucker explained the stark differences in drug prices between the U.S. and Europe, noting that trade agreements around patents play a key role in driving these disparities:

“There's medications you can buy in Europe for 1/10th the cost of [the US]. And trade agreements affect patents. It's wonky stuff but it's one of those ways in which trade prioritizes the profits of the corporations over the needs of the people.”

She also addressed how erratic tariff policies can disrupt the supply chain for generic medicines:

“With Trump, things have been so crazy and erratic. The erratic way that some of these tariffs have been applied may really interrupt some of the supply chain of things like the raw ingredients that come to make generic medicines.”

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## 5. Policy Recommendations

- Strengthen labor enforcement in the USMCA and beyond
  - Enforce binding labor standards in USMCA with transparent, timely, and accessible complaint mechanisms.
  - Require regular monitoring and participation from frontline workers and their unions in enforcement.
- Require community consultation in all trade negotiations
  - Require public hearings and community consultation prior to, during, and after negotiations.
  - Mandate the inclusion of labor, environmental, Indigenous, migrant, and gender justice organizations on advisory committees.
  - Create democratic oversight structures for trade deals to prevent corporate overreach
- Ensure trade supports climate targets and Indigenous sovereignty
  - Enforce binding environmental standards in USMCA with transparent, timely, and accessible complaint mechanisms.
  - Ensure Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) from Indigenous communities before any trade-related development or resource extraction.
  - End investor-state dispute settlement (ISDS) mechanisms that allow corporations to sue governments for enforcing labor protections.
- Develop binding human rights standards
  - Enforce binding human standards in USMCA with transparent, timely, and accessible complaint mechanisms.
  - End trade policies that displace communities and decimate local economies in the Global South.
  - Protect migrant workers' rights and ensure trade policy does not exacerbate labor exploitation under guestworker programs.
- Reject digital trade rules that undermine data privacy and accountability
  - Ensure digital rules do not restrict democratic oversight of algorithms, artificial intelligence, or surveillance technologies.
  - Prohibit corporations from using trade rules to block transparency, avoid regulation, or shift accountability for harm caused by digital platforms.
  - Require that cross-border data flows be contingent on strong privacy, labor, and human rights protections, with clear mechanisms for enforcement.
- Guarantee Equitable Access to Medicines
  - Reject trade provisions that grant pharmaceutical corporations extended monopolies or block generic competition.

- Ensure public health comes before patent rights by enabling governments to produce or import life-saving medicines without trade retaliation.
  - Protect countries' rights to regulate their health systems, including drug pricing, licensing, and equitable distribution of health technologies.
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## **6. Conclusion**

Trade justice is inseparable from the broader fight for social justice. The stories shared in this report make clear that trade policy is not an abstract or distant issue—it is a powerful force that shapes the daily realities of people's lives, the health of communities, and the future of our ecosystems. From labor exploitation and environmental destruction to the erosion of public services and Indigenous sovereignty, the consequences of unjust trade rules are both immediate and generational.

Policymakers must move beyond closed-door negotiations that privilege corporate interests and instead center the voices of those most impacted—workers, frontline communities, Indigenous nations, and civil society. A just trade system must be built on the pillars of equity, sustainability, and democratic accountability, with the explicit goal of repairing harm, redistributing power, and building a future where trade serves people and the planet—not profit.

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## **7. Appendix**

- [Full testimonies from the People's Hearing](#)