

**Ava Tomasula y Garcia**

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**Testimony in support of Senate Bills 1037, 914, and 106**

To Senator Gomes, Representative Tercyak, and the Members of the Labor Committee:

My name is Ava Tomasula y Garcia, and I want to speak in support of Senate Bills 1037, 914, and 106. I am a student at Yale University, and I would like to talk about a case of wage theft that is happening just a minute's walk away from my dormitory. This took place at Gourmet Heaven, a popular 24-hour deli which students call "G-Heav." The Department of Labor closed its investigation of the business last year, and the deli's owner was subsequently found to have withheld more than \$218,000 in wages during a 2-year period. I want to emphasize that many workers at G-Heav have been working at the store for much, much longer than 2 years, and the total amount of wages stolen from workers is likely over \$1,000,000. As Julio Olivar, a G-Heav employee who was fired in retaliation for speaking with the DOL, said, "Legally, I can claim ONLY the last two years of unpaid wages. But I worked here for seven years. Can you imagine how much money [the owner] has stolen from me? I did the math: About ten thousand dollars per year, for seven years. That's seventy thousand dollars." If these bills had been law when G-Heav was still in court, then Julio and his family would be living their lives differently. I know that, if my family were \$70,000 short, I certainly wouldn't be in school right now.

G-Heav is a case study in how, even when workers' cases do come to court, they rarely get what they are due. The state loses revenue, and honest employers who play by the rules are hurt. This affects everybody: from entire families, to our entire state. And so I am here today to speak about my personal ties to wage theft. The property that houses G-Heav is owned and managed by Yale

University Properties. This means that Yale invited the store to open on campus to improve student life, and that Yale is responsible for what happens on that property. And yet when I and many other students have pressed our administration to investigate the abuses they are subsidizing in their own property, they have answered by saying they don't have the resources to do so. I know this is untrue. My school has an endowment that exceeded the revenue of the entire Hollywood industry last year. I have been told again and again that Yale is a community of people that look out for each other. The issue here is about taking responsibility, not dodging it. If Connecticut takes the responsibility for the stolen wages its workers are owed, then that will force private actors like Yale to take responsibility for their own role in making our city an unequal, unsafe place to work.

When CT has inadequate wage laws and does not enforce even these, then it is easier for my University—and other institutions and private citizens—to take robbery less seriously. Yale has its own police force, and the entire school gets an email informing them whenever a student is robbed walking somewhere. Yet we're never told when employees at Yale, who are also members of this community, are robbed of much, much greater amounts of money. In history class, I learn about the sweatshop labor of the 19<sup>th</sup> century; how workers were grossly underpaid or not paid at all. No one mentions wage theft as the same thing, although it's happening right now, across the street. Bills 914, 1037, and 106 will help prevent wage theft, that is, they will help prevent the outright robbery of sweatshop labor. They will work to call out those who are responsible, they will help restore faith in our economic system and make sure that everyone in our state knows that, yes, they too are part of this community. Thank you.