

American Institute of Architects New York Committee on Civil Service and Labor Testimony

Thank you for holding this hearing today. I am Ben Prosky, Executive Director of the American Institute of Architects New York, also known as AIA New York. We represent New York City's public-sector and private-sector architects, who are employed at government agencies, firms, and universities. Our members include unionized and non-unionized architects, as well as workers and management.

This hearing's topic is very timely, since architects at some of New York City's architecture firms are in the process of unionizing. Support for unionization has arisen from the poor compensation architects receive, as well as the workplace issues working for low wages creates. The US Department of Justice does not allow AIA New York to collectively bargain for our members or organize work stoppages. This means we cannot work with agencies, owners, and developers to set fair fees and wages for their employees.

According to the 2021 AIA Compensation Report, the average salary in New York City for a recent architecture school graduate is \$58,000 per year. This is not enough to cover hundreds of thousands of dollars in student debt accrued over a decade of education, nor the high cost of living convenient to most offices. Comparatively, first-year associates at New York City law firms earn \$215,000 per year.

In addition to being underpaid, architects are pressed to work incredibly long hours. Agencies rarely receive sufficient funding for staffing, leading agency leadership to overwork their architects. Meanwhile, firms are unable to collectively bargain for fees, allowing owners and developers to set high work requirements for low fees. As a result, firm owners push their architects to work incredibly long hours, with 60- to 70-hour work weeks not being uncommon.

Unionization in architecture is an important tool to strengthen workers' rights but it will not solve many of the industry's core problems. Our unionized members at agencies are paid less than our non-unionized members at firms. For instance, the starting salary for a Department of Design and Construction Junior Project Manager is \$51,000 a year.

Fortunately, Council Members can strengthen workers' rights for architects. They can assign larger budgets for agencies, specifically to hire more architects and pay architects higher wages. The Council can also require that agencies stop demanding free work from architecture firms. Agencies regularly require a significant amount of upfront work from firms before awarding a contract, yet that work is not compensated. Combined with unionization, changes like these will create a better working environment for architects.

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