

The following was submitted to The Independent by a group of House Democratic staff members, who requested their identities be withheld for fear of retaliation. The Independent has verified the identities of the staff members involved.

The events of the last two weeks make perfectly clear that this is a dangerous time to be a staffer at the Missouri State Capitol.

After just six days of Session, there's already been a COVID outbreak, and rumors have swirled about violent activities of paramilitary groups since the events of January 6. House Democrats have been quick to condemn the violence of the Capitol Insurrection and the failure of House Republicans to take simple, life-saving precautions against COVID-19, like wearing a mask and social distancing.

But House Democrats have been conspicuously silent on the hazards to staff from within.

This was on full display during the Jan. 13 floor debate of House Complaint 1 involving Rep. Wiley Price.

In the ensuing hours, five Democrats spoke. Each one of them had the opportunity to condemn harassment and retaliation in the workplace. Each one of them declined to do so. Instead, staffers got empty platitudes: the committee's work needs to be honored, censure is a historical first, the process needs to be respected, and finally, at the eleventh hour, "staff we see you, we love you, we appreciate you."

Throughout, staff have been the perennial afterthought. But make no mistake, the decision not to stress the importance of staff safety, not to condemn those actions of Rep. Price that are not in dispute, was not due to forgetfulness. This is obvious because, of the eight Republicans to speak on the Floor that day, every single one of them reminded the Democrats that staff safety is important. In fact, if the thesis of the Democrats was, "we need to respect the process," that of the Republicans was, "we need to respect staff."

Watching this debate unfold was like watching an episode of the Twilight Zone. People who we admire actively let us down, and people for whom we have no warm feelings rushed to our defense. It is shameful that the Democratic Caucus, a group that consistently claims the mantle of championing dignity for working people, should be so complicit in worsening an already toxic environment for their own employees.

This has not been lost on staff and activists on both sides of the aisle, who have had the courage to publicly condemn Rep. Price's actions, some even calling for his resignation. But House Democratic leadership made the inexplicable strategic decision to dig in and refused to acknowledge that what happened to the staffer in question was wrong.

This defensiveness is the very reason the many staffers who sympathize with these sentiments insisted that this op-ed be submitted anonymously. We fear retaliation from our own side, and can see plainly that few in the Democratic Caucus will come to our aid.

Staff are the foundation of the General Assembly; the building literally could not function without us. We work tirelessly in an already toxic environment to support the Democratic Caucus when it needs us.

But when we most needed them, where was their support? Strategically absent.

Empty words not supported by actions are mere talking points. Staff actually care about improving the culture of the Capitol. They deserve leaders who will do more than pay lip service to this cause while simultaneously undermining it.