

Focus on Kentucky: The Living Wage

Catholic social teaching insists that workers receive a just wage, defined as the amount needed to meet the minimum needs of a family. But, the minimum wage of \$5.15 per hour, or \$10,712 yearly, keeps minimum wage workers below the poverty line unless they are given some other financial help. Companies paying less than a just wage, in reality, are shifting part of their wage costs to the public that must subsidize those low-wage workers with:

- food stamps;
- emergency medical services; and
- housing and other social services.

Living-wage campaigns partially address unjust wages by passing local ordinances requiring private businesses benefiting from public money to pay wages that keep their workers above the poverty line. Nationally over 100 living-wage ordinances have passed, including one in Louisville, Kentucky.

Public policy

While living-wage campaigns mandate employers to pay their workers substantially more than minimum wage, each campaign remains flexible. Some exempt small employers with fewer than 5 workers. Others make special allowances for non-profit groups. But, the living-wage movement tries to set a wage rate to meet the minimum needs of a family.

Kentucky workers would benefit if a living-wage policy were in place on

- the city level;
- the county level; or
- the state level.

For More Information:

Visit the website of the National Interfaith Committee for Worker Justice: www.nicwj.org.

For Discussion and Reflection

1. What aspects of your daily work allow you to feel creative and fulfilled? How could you change your work life to help you grow spiritually?
2. What are the negative effects of workaholicism? In what ways does society, or the economic system, contribute to workaholicism?
3. How do you spend your weekly Sabbath?
4. List the social benefits and changes unions have supported over the years.
5. What new laws and policies would help people who work but remain poor?
6. What are ways we can help ensure that workers obtain a living wage?
7. List those in society that depend on gratuities for a living wage. What should be the gratuity for each service?

Scripture Meditations

Psalm 8
Matthew 20:1-16
Luke 12:13-21
1 Timothy 6:7-10, 17-19



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THE DIGNITY OF WORK



and the Rights of Workers



Economic Justice
in 21st Century Kentucky:
Holding Ourselves Accountable

5—Honoring the Creator's Gifts

THE DIGNITY OF WORK AND THE RIGHTS OF WORKERS

Work as Divine Activity

After creating the world, God rested from all the work God had undertaken (Gen. 2:2). When God redeemed the Israelites from their Babylonian captivity, God referred to salvation as “the work of my hands” (Is. 29:23). Work is divine activity. Because God placed Adam, that is, humanity, in the Garden to care for it, we share in God’s work and recognize **the dignity of work**.

Work as Economic Activity

The economy exists to serve people, not simply to make money. By work, people express their dignity through creativity, service and support for the common good. From an economic perspective people work to earn a livelihood, but they also work to achieve self-fulfillment and to make a contribution to society.

The Rights of Workers

The dignity of work prompts the church to teach about **the rights of workers**: the right to decent work, to a just wage, to health care, to organize and form unions, to private property, and to economic initiative. Workers also need a weekly Sabbath and periodic rest.

Those working in gainful employment and those working in the home become a working community. Each day people participate in God’s work by exercising a respectful dominion over creation and building a just society.



Scripture Speaks. . .

Since on the seventh day God was finished with the work he had been doing, he rested on the seventh day from all the work he had undertaken. (Gen. 2:2)



The LORD God then took the man and settled him in the garden of Eden, to cultivate and care for it. (Gen. 2:15)

When his children see the work of my hands in his midst, They shall keep my name holy. (Is. 29:23)

People in Kentucky

Kentuckians see quality manufacturing jobs moving overseas and job-based health coverage shrinking. Global forces are transforming major portions of Kentucky’s economy and workers’ vision of a full and abundant life.

- Kentucky experienced a net job loss of 31,100 jobs between January, 2001 and June, 2004.
- 3 of the 4 new jobs created in Kentucky are low-paying service jobs.
- Kentucky’s unemployment rate consistently hovers above the national rate.

The Church Teaches

Work honors the Creator’s gifts and the talents received from him. It can also be redemptive... Everyone should be able to draw from work the means of providing for his life and that of his family, and of serving the human community. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nn. 2427, 2428.



Among the basic rights of the human person must be counted the right of freely founding labor unions. *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 68. *The Documents of Vatican II*, Walter M. Abbott, S.J., editor. Reprinted with permission of America Press, Inc. © 1966. All Rights Reserved. For subscription information, call 1-800-627-9533 or visit www.americamagazine.org.



The many proposals put forward by experts in Catholic social teaching and by the highest magisterium of the church take on special significance: proposals for joint ownership of the means of work, sharing by the workers in the management and/or profits of business, so-called shareholding by labor, etc.... It is clear that recognition of the proper position of labor and the worker in the production process demands various adaptations in the sphere of the right to ownership of the means of production. *Laborem Exercens*, n. 14.