

Workers: A Missing Link in the Theology-Economics Debate

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Theology and economics: two different worlds? That is the question, supremely so in this era of economic globalization. And the way we in the churches deal with it could just possibly make a significant difference.

Right now, as broadly evidenced in the preaching, teaching, and practice of everyday ministry in our churches, the answer, sad to say, is yes. Yes, theology and economics *are* two different worlds, and not only have we church folk made the assumption with little questioning, so has the society of which we are a part. In contemporary life, as Archbishop Williams stated in his presentation to the Trinity Institute conference, “economic motivations, relationships, conventions, and so on are the fundamental thing and the rest is window-dressing. . . . The language of customer and provider has wormed its way into practically all areas of our social life, even education and health care.”¹ But even when we preach about the evils of consumerism and lavish lifestyles—or even decry the enormous and growing gap between rich and poor in our country—we hold back from questioning the economic system itself: that globalizing twenty-first-century capitalist engine that permeates our economic and social life down to the village level.

How do we begin raising the question of “the economy” in a way that is both theologically grounded and involves our churches in “on the ground” solutions? A crucial and often overlooked aspect of this question is to recognize that no economy—from global down to local—can function without *workers*. Workers of all sorts and conditions: manufacturing workers who create cars and houses and computers; service workers, such as janitors, hotel and restaurant workers, health

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¹ Rowan Williams, “Theology and Economics: Two Different Worlds?” *Anglican Theological Review* 92, no. 4 (Fall 2010): 607–608.

care personnel, gardeners, drivers, air traffic controllers, retail clerks, office staff, and the like, are the indispensable hands-on sustainers of the economy, without whose contribution it could not function. The closer we can get to the actual lives of these workers, to see the world from their perspective, and to understand the issues that confront them, the more we can at least partly see where we need to go, both theologically and practically, in order to address seriously the question of “the economy.”

So we start with a question: Of what significance are workers on the job to the whole capitalist system?

The long-reigning assumption in capitalism is that workers are a *commodity*. The seventeenth-century philosopher Thomas Hobbes expressed it succinctly: “A man’s labor is a commodity exchangeable for benefit as well as any other thing.”² But should we allow this definition to stand unquestioned? Our Baptismal Covenant has a contrasting view. There, we draw upon the deep biblical tradition of human beings as created in God’s image, a God who calls us to “strive for peace and justice among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being.”³ That is our theological baseline. It should apply to all working people.

To understand this contrast better from a work perspective, I offer three examples of how the churches, together with working people and the community, have effectively attempted to do just that: bring the dignity and respect of a living wage to struggling workers.

Example one: The campaign to persuade the City of Los Angeles to enact a living wage ordinance

Living wage ordinances in our cities generally began to be passed in the mid-1990s in response to the increasingly obvious wage gap between the ever richer top tier and the working poor—a gap now put at almost 400 to 1.

In Los Angeles in early 1996, I was part of a small group of activists from the community, organized labor, academia, and the religious community who came together to push the city to pass such an ordinance. Companies receive generous subsidies and tax breaks from the

² Quoted in *The Oxford Book of Work*, ed. Keith Thomas (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), xiv.

³ *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Hymnal, 1979), 305.

city as enticements to do business there, said the coalition. In return, their wage policies must substantially improve the wages and benefits of the workers they employ. Coalition leaders closely coordinated a sophisticated and innovative campaign to create widespread political support for the ordinance.

The religious community organized itself into Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice (CLUE) and began to employ a diverse array of tactics. They appeared at rallies with workers, thus getting to know them firsthand and praying with them. They wrote letters to city council members, the most innovative of which were written on paper plates. Over one thousand church school children drew on paper plates with Thanksgiving Day messages (“Serve up a Living Wage!”), then put a stamp on them and mailed them.

Other innovative and press-garnering tactics were used, including a dramatic visit by an actor, dressed as the ghost of Jacob Marley, to the mayor. And church executives wrote an op-ed article for the *Los Angeles Times*, emphasizing the moral imperative and concern for the well-being of the whole community. Throughout the campaign, religious leaders, including both Episcopal bishops, were present and visible at rallies and vigils, frequently using religious symbols and rites.

The result was the passage (over the mayor’s veto) of the most progressive living wage ordinance in the nation to that time. Now adjusted (as of January 2010) for wage and health benefit levels, the base wage for any worker in Los Angeles working for a company contracting with the city or receiving city subsidies is \$10.30 per hour, plus \$4.50 per hour for health benefits (or if health benefits are not provided, a total wage of \$14.80 per hour).

At its height, well over one hundred cities in the United States passed such ordinances, several with religious participation. At the core was a moral principle still unfulfilled, namely that *anyone who works full-time for a living should not have to raise a family in poverty*. Or to put it positively, as Bishop Fred Borsch (then Bishop of Los Angeles), a long and consistent advocate for a living wage, has said: “Paying a living wage helps build a healthy society.”

Example two: The campaign to end wage theft in America

We know there is widespread working poverty in America; many workers do not get paid enough to make ends meet. But an unrecog-

nized fact is that billions of dollars in wages are stolen every year from millions of American workers, and that both knowingly and through ignorance of the law, employers are the perpetrators. Workers are not paid the lawful minimum wage, or they are misclassified by their employers as independent contractors, or are not paid for overtime according to the law. Frequently no Social Security, worker's compensation, or other benefits are set aside by employers. Undocumented immigrants are frequently underpaid, and sometimes not paid at all.

In February of this year, people of faith in Miami-Dade County, Florida joined with labor and community leaders in celebrating the enactment of the first county-wide ordinance in the nation to combat wage theft. Instrumental in the victory was the South Florida Interfaith Worker Justice group, one of over seventy regional projects and worker centers affiliated with the Chicago-based Interfaith Worker Justice (IWJ). The South Florida IWJ group, noting widespread abuses directed toward day laborers, initially sought remedies for wage abuse in individual cases, but quickly recognized this as a systemic problem, one with conflicting or incomplete legal remedies rendered by different government agencies. Building political support and carefully cultivating relationships, the group used local university researchers and enlisted church and union support, including the South Florida AFL-CIO. Among the strongest church supporters is the Episcopal Diocese of Southeast Florida, which has officially recognized South Florida IWJ as one of their ministries. As a follow-up to the enactment of the new wage theft ordinance, the IWJ group is launching a "Thou Shalt Not Steal" campaign directed to church congregations, asking their aid in identifying workers whose situation the new law might cover.

The law will potentially benefit every worker in Miami-Dade County, making it easier for workers to bring legal action against employers who illegally underpay or fail to pay them. Just as the passage of the living wage ordinance in Los Angeles stimulated similar efforts in other cities, it is hoped that this action will encourage groups all over the country to establish similar legal provisions for workers elsewhere.

Says Kim Bobo, national head of Interfaith Worker Justice and a widely admired practitioner of worker justice: "If a worker steals from his or her employer, the worker faces serious consequences. . . . If, on the other hand, an employer steals wages from workers, it is usually a

crime without consequences.”⁴ Bobo’s book is thoroughly researched, full of illustrative personal stories, and grounded in gospel social justice values.

*Example three: A new labor-green alliance,
with the churches participating*

A new labor-green alliance, joined in both west and east coast port cities by faith-based organizations, is tackling the twin injustices of air pollution and worker exploitation at American ports. The air pollution, causing documented respiratory distress and disease among community residents, comes from the older, high-emission diesel trucks of the port drivers. The drivers themselves, far from fitting the stereotype of burly high-paid truckers, are now low-paid, mostly independent contractors—a far cry from the good union jobs such truckers had before the 1980s and widespread deregulation. The underlying question at the heart of the matter was stated clearly in a recent major article in the *New York Times*: “Seaports from Newark to Miami to Seattle are confronting the same issue: who should pay for the cleaner trucks?”⁵

The ports of Los Angeles, Oakland, Newark, and Seattle have each seen their local faith groups⁶ play significant roles in the campaign. In the first three cities mentioned, faith groups about four years ago joined sophisticated local coalitions and achieved significant victories for both workers and the environment, with the mayors of those cities also joining in support. In Seattle, the social action committee of the Church Council of Greater Seattle sponsored in March a “Port Toxic Tour” for local clergy as this younger coalition rapidly gathers steam. As religious leaders we witnessed firsthand the congestion and disarray of the port area, especially the congestion of the two surrounding communities, their streets choked at night with the parked truck cabs that lack parking facilities. We heard from a resident about the polluted air from diesel fumes, saw the frequently battered trucks, and saw the

⁴ Kim Bobo, *Wage Theft in America* (New York: The New Press, 2009), 144.

⁵ Steven Greenhouse, “Clearing the Air at American Ports,” *The New York Times* (February 25, 2010).

⁶ Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice Los Angeles (CLUE LA), East Bay Alliance for a Sustainable Economy in Oakland (EBASE), Green Faith in New Brunswick, New Jersey, and the Church Council of Greater Seattle. All are ecumenical/interfaith; the Episcopal Church is involved in all of them.

school where the Environmental Protection Agency had stationed an air pollution monitor. An eye-opener for us was to hear firsthand the stories of two drivers of the trucks as they haul their loads from dock-side to rail yards or beyond, to the local warehouses of such merchant behemoths as Walmart, Target, and Costco.

Surprisingly, the vast majority of the drivers in the Seattle port are immigrants, many from East Africa. About fifteen hundred drivers move the massive containers daily, the yearly value of which is an estimated \$35 billion. These non-union drivers (being independent contractors they are not permitted to join a union) earn only about \$29,000 a year on average after expenses, plus a steep security clearance fee. A large majority are in deep debt on their truck payments. The result may sometimes be a take-home pay of only \$450 a week in the cutthroat competition of a slow economy. And being independent contractors, they pay for their own health insurance—if they have any. “We are not treated like human beings!” said Femi, a Nigerian driver who met with us. (His first name only is used here to avoid possible retaliation.) Femi indicated he must pay \$700 a month for insurance on his haulage, and pointed out that when he sustained a fall recently his medical expense was not covered, but his cargo was—out of his own pocket. It is clear what’s valuable here.

Now the struggle for clean air and worker rights at the nation’s ports has moved to Congress as well as the courts. In response to landmark gains for truckers and the environment in Los Angeles in 2008 as a result of their campaign, the American Trucking Association successfully brought suit last year to prevent the reclassification of the truckers as employees and also to tighter regulation of port air quality. (The Walmarts, Costcos, and big shipping companies of the nation’s ports obviously want to head off bearing any costs now borne by the affected communities and port truckers.) Not to be deterred, the various port coalitions, along with the unions and national environmental organizations, have responded with an extensive national campaign to change the law to permit reforms to go through. The religious community has been urged to write to Congress as well as continue their campaigns locally. At this writing, community, labor, and religious representatives are headed to Washington, D.C. in early May for a congressional hearing on the issue.⁷

⁷ At the hearing, after testimony from religious and community leaders, and including port truckers, the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee voted to

So with their current practices in the nation's ports, big box retailers, big shipping companies, and steamship lines are together fueling a race to the bottom, forcing trucking companies to compete by undercutting each other and paying drivers poverty wages, and polluting the air. It's another clash between economics and theology—between the huge profits of one sector of the globalized economy on the one hand, and the dignity and respect of working people on the other—this one as it plays out in global trade.



How can the foregoing examples of the religious community's involvement in the struggles of working people help us bring theology and economics under the same tent, both theologically and programmatically? In my many years of advocacy for justice for workers, the words *dignity* and *respect* keep coming up again and again in conversations with them. As I have indicated, they happen to be the key words in the Baptismal Covenant that undergird the mission of the church to the world.

“People go out to their work and to their labor until the evening,” says the psalmist (Psalm 104:23). In his landmark 1981 encyclical *Laborem Exercens* (On Human Work), Pope John Paul II stated that human “life is built up every day from work, from work it derives its specific dignity.”⁸ He went on to explore the biblical roots of his assertion, strongly asserting the primacy of labor over capital. Together with our taking on the concerns and struggles of working people as a primary arena for justice, we have here a theological wedge to inject into the debate over how our theology connects with the economy. A theology of work—a much-neglected realm of theological enquiry—is, I believe, needed more than ever.

And we also have some precedents in our church's recent history to inspire us. In the closing decades of the nineteenth century the robber barons and industrial elites of our country strengthened their dominance of the economy amid intense industrial strife, strikes, and the human suffering of communities and workers brutally marginalized in

launch a congressional investigation. In August, a bill, HR 5967, was drafted and support is needed.

⁸ *Laborem Exercens*, Encyclical Letter of Pope John Paul II (1981); http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091981_laborem-exercens_en.html.

the process. Slowly the churches began to awaken to the injustices, and by 1886 Bishop Henry Potter of the Diocese of New York issued a pastoral letter which stated in part: “When capitalists and labor have forever dismissed the fallacy . . . that labor and the laborer are alike a *commodity* to be bought and sold . . . then, but not until then, may we hope to heal grave social divisions.”⁹

Bishop Potter was far from alone in that time. In 1891, Trinity Church, Wall Street celebrated Labor Sunday with delegates from the Knights of Labor in procession, as well as clergy coming from all over the city. Labor Day was in fact being widely observed by many religious denominations. It was the dawning of the era of the social gospel movement, which was to exert major moral influence upon the political progressivism of the early twentieth century.

It would seem, then, that to bring together the realms of theology and economics, we must have first, a theology drawing generously upon a theology of work—one boldly addressing the realities of global capitalism. Second, working from the other end, we need the direct and sustained involvement of the interfaith religious community in the primary struggles of working people everywhere.

The stakes for both the credibility of the church, and for the world itself, are huge. The widely respected European historian Tony Judt recently said it well: “The thin veneer of civilization rests upon what may well be an illusory faith in our common humanity. . . . We would do well to cling to it.”¹⁰

⁹ See Henry F. May, *Protestant Churches and Industrial America* (New York: Harper, 1949) for a fascinating and extensive treatment of this period.

¹⁰ Tony Judt, “Edge People,” *The New York Review of Books* (March 25, 2010): 15.