



Workers on the Move: Immigration and Economic Justice in the U.S.

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Workers are on the move. Immigration and economic justice are integrally linked at this moment in our nation and world's history. If you care about poverty, economic justice and fair wages then you must also care about immigration. Let's consider immigration in light of the Lucan Good Samaritan account. The backdrop of the story begins in *Luke* chapter 10 when a lawyer asks Jesus the way to inherit eternal life. Jesus then asks the lawyer how the law would answer his question to which the lawyer replies, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself" (v27). The text then continues:

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?' Jesus replied, 'A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend." Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?' He said, 'The one who showed him mercy.' Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise.' (vv 29-37)

Let me suggest four core lessons related to this text and immigrant economic justice.

Lesson One: Immigrants and sojourners are vulnerable to robbers. The man in Jesus' parable was going from Jerusalem to Jericho. Commentators tell us that the road between

Jerusalem and Jericho was a steep, rocky and dangerous gorge. He was “on the move” when he was robbed. Workers on the move are vulnerable to attackers waiting by the roadside. This is not a new situation.

Most immigrants come to the US seeking work. It is a well known reality that many immigrants are robbed and abused as they cross the border. However, perhaps the more significant and unknown robbery is the ongoing stealing of immigrant workers’ wages which often robs them of their overall livelihood. Unfortunately, immigrant workers are getting robbed and beaten in the US workplace on a regular basis. If you look at any industry that hires primarily immigrants it is almost always an industry that regularly steals from and injures workers. For example, the poultry/meatpacking, farm labor, janitorial services, landscaping, home care, and garment worker industries all routinely abuse workers.

Three months ago a new report, *Broken Laws, Unprotected Workers*, was released which revealed the results from the largest survey ever taken of workers in low-wage jobs. More than 4500 workers in Chicago, New York and LA were surveyed. And let me be clear – these three cities are in states with relatively strong labor laws and enforcement agencies, compared to, for example, New Orleans or any other southern city. The results are shocking:

- 26 percent of workers aren’t paid the minimum wage
- 76 percent of those who worked overtime weren’t paid for it
- On average, workers were underpaid \$51 per week. That’s over \$2500 per year. Having \$2500 stolen from wages would be a lot for anyone, but especially for someone earning \$18,000 to \$20,000 per year.
- Only 8 percent of low-wage workers injured on the job filed for workers compensation, the state-run programs designed to help workers hurt in their workplaces.

The statistics on unauthorized immigrant workers are even worse. The survey showed that:

- Almost half (47 percent) of unauthorized women immigrants aren’t paid the minimum wage.
- 85 percent of unauthorized immigrants aren’t paid for overtime hours worked.ⁱ

I begin my latest book, *Wage Theft in America*, with a story about a garment sweatshop near my house in Chicago. I learned about the sweatshop when some of the workers visited

Interfaith Worker Justice's worker center and complained about wages and working conditions. I organized a group of religious leaders to visit the sweatshop. Four blocks from my house, in the upstairs of a two-story commercial building, was a garment factory. There was no sign or visible marking on the outside of the building.

The cold Chicago morning we dropped by the garment factory, the door was unlocked, so we marched up the stairs and went into the factory. As we walked through the factory floor looking for the manager, the workers kept sewing. They didn't look up from their machines. The place was full of immigrant women bent over sewing machines.

When we finally found the manager, we asked about wages. She told us the workers were all paid \$5.15 per hour. When we responded that \$5.15 per hour was below the Illinois legal minimum wage, she acted surprised and wanted to know why she hadn't been told. When we asked about health benefits for the workers, she told us the women didn't need health benefits because they all received them from their husbands.

One of my colleagues went to visit the restroom, just to check out the facilities. A worker jumped up from her sewing station and ran over to offer toilet paper. Come to find out, the employer didn't provide toilet paper. Workers had to bring their own. This was indeed a sweatshop, right in my own backyard. Workers weren't even being paid the minimum wage. Immigrant workers were systematically having their wages stolen. This particular sweatshop was a sole subcontractor for Cintas, the nation's largest industrial laundry and uniform company. These immigrant women were being robbed in my backyard. Unfortunately, immigrant workers are being robbed all around us.

A few years ago, I was on an Illinois panel convened by the governor's office to find ways to reduce Latino deaths and injuries in the workplace. This summer a new DOL report came out: nationwide deaths of Hispanic workers (those who died on the job) have risen 76 percent from 1992 to 2007, while the overall workplace deaths declined. Recently I was in Omaha and met with a leader from the Somali community. He told me he knew 300 Somali refugees who had been injured in meatpacking plants but didn't know they could file for workers compensation. Stories of robbery and abuse are all around us. Immigrant workers, especially those without legal authorization, are clearly like the man robbed and abused as he traveled in Luke's Good Samaritan account.

Lesson Two: Many good people look away and ignore robbed and injured workers. *Luke*

Chapter 10 tells readers that a priest passed by the wounded man. Then another religious leader, a Levite passed by. How often do we overlook what is happening right in front of us? I didn't see the garment sweatshop near my house. Likewise, there is a carwash near my house with terrible working conditions that I didn't notice at first. Across the country it is standard practice for carwash workers to pay for their spot to stand, no matter the weather, to wipe cars for tips and not wages. Plus, if a car washer is injured on the job, he or she will not be covered by OSHA. Until some friends mentioned what was going on in the carwash, I never saw the workers.

Most of us benefit from immigrant labor but I would like to suggest that few of us stop to see how immigrants are robbed and injured. Let me explain. Do you eat food? If you buy food in the grocery store, it was picked by farmworkers, most of whom have been cheated out of wages – even under inadequate farmworker laws – and their bodies harmed by work in the fields. Have you talked with any farmworkers? It is brutal work. Our food is the product of immigrant labor, the same immigrants who are robbed and injured on a daily basis, but we don't see.

Do you eat out? Restaurant work is another notoriously abusive industry. Restaurants routinely steal wages from workers, especially from immigrants in the “back of the house.” A few years ago, soon after Katrina, Interfaith Worker Justice interns interviewed workers in New Orleans and discovered widespread wage theft in construction and restaurants. Last year, restaurant workers in Chicago came into the IWJ-affiliated workers center from over 200 restaurants. Not a single worker had been paid overtime. If you go to restaurants, there are workers not getting paid.

Do you hire workers to help in your home? If so, if you did not ask how the workers were paid then you turned your head from thievery. Contract workers that help with cleaning, child care, landscaping, driving, and residential construction often do not get paid fairly and it is up to you and me to assure fair wages. If you do not stop and inquire about contract workers' wages then you are passing an immigrant by without stopping to help.

A few years ago, I arrived at my office, housed at a large Presbyterian Church, only to discover that the church had signed a \$450,000 tuck pointing contract with a non-union firm that was notorious for illegally paying its workers as independent contractors when they were really

employees. By doing this, an employer steals from the workers by not paying overtime pay and the employer side of payroll taxes, as well as from the public coffers, by not paying into state unemployment funds and workers compensation funds. The workers were all Polish immigrant workers who didn't know that they needed to be paid as employees, not independent contractors. They also didn't understand that the tuck pointing dust is deadly. Until my staff called OSHA, the federal health and safety enforcement agency, the workers wore no protective gear to safeguard their health. The church leadership didn't mean to steal from and injure the workers, but by failing to ask about how workers would be paid and treated, the leadership turned its back on workers.

Lesson Three: Stopping to help requires tending wounds and walking with immigrants. It is one thing to give money to the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD), and you should do that. It's a good thing to volunteer once a year at a soup kitchen. Do that, once or more often. It's another thing altogether to stop and try to "help" an immigrant worker who has been robbed. This can get more complicated because you can't just give a little money or food and expect the worker's problems to be solved. Like the Good Samaritan, you've got to figure out how to bandage up the wounds, stop the bleeding, and stop the hemorrhaging of wages.

To help robbed immigrant workers, you have to stop and get off your path. You can't do everything the same way you have always done it and be able to help. The Samaritan had to get off his beast. I don't know if it was a horse, a donkey or something else, but he had to get down. And then he put the robbed man on his animal and walked along side him. In the same way, current economic and social injustices are calling us to respond. I think there are five overall approaches to tend and walk with wounded immigrants:

1) Challenge employers to pay workers fairly. In our congregations and business schools, we should push employers and future employers to grapple with what it means to be a just and fair employer. Clearly, many who steal wages from immigrant workers are active and sometimes big donors in congregations. The owner of Cintas, for example, is a very large donor in his parish and the stadium at Xavier University. The owner of Pulte Homes, the nation's largest home builder, has a business model that relies on robbing immigrant workers at the bottom of the chain and is another big donor in his parish. There are educational and pastoral roles to challenge this kind of thinking and living. There are also activist roles to play.

Last year, some workers from a Chicago chain restaurant, called Homemade Pizza, showed up at the Arise Chicago Workers' Center. The workers claimed that when they complained about having to put stale pepperoni on the pizzas, the employer fired them and refused to pay their last paychecks. (Refusing to pay final paychecks is a common way unethical employers steal wages from workers.)

When the workers' center leaders talked with the workers, they discovered that some of the workers weren't being paid minimum wage and none were receiving overtime pay. Their employer was violating three laws by denying them their last paycheck, minimum wage and overtime. The center leaders called the employer and politely asked if there was some misunderstanding. The employer said some nasty things over the phone.

Because it was clear that the problems would not get resolved by simply talking nicely with the employer, the workers center leaders sent an email to concerned people in Chicago asking if we would show up one evening at 6 p.m. near one of five Homemade Pizza locations in the Chicagoland area. I showed up at the one nearest me on Clark Street, along with about fifteen other folks. We divided ourselves into two groups. A small delegation including one of the affected workers and me was sent into the pizza store. Meanwhile, the others handed out flyers outside the restaurant urging those walking by not to buy "pizza topped with exploitation." Inside, we urged the young man at the counter to call the owner and urge him to rehire the workers. When he claimed he didn't have the owner's phone number, we dialed it for him on my cell phone. Thirty minutes later, the owner, who had gotten calls from five of his facilities, called the workers center demanding to meet. Within a week, he had paid all the workers their owed wages. Direct action works.

2) Support workers who organize unions. Union workers are much more likely to be paid family wages and benefits and are seldom victims of wage theft. If there is wage theft in a union workplace, the union will help fight it. Unions are particularly important for immigrant workers, even in regions and religious communities where unions are unpopular. Catholic Social teaching is clear about the important role unions play in society. As the pope says, unions are indispensable—not perfect, but indispensable for social justice.

3) Strengthen wage enforcement. Interfaith Worker Justice is working nationally to strengthen federal enforcement of wage and hour laws. Interfaith Worker Justice is currently

working on three bills that would: 1) Change the statute of limitations for recovering wages for workers; 2) Mandate that employers provide paystubs; and 3) Establish a pilot partnership program between the Department of Labor (DOL) and workers centers. In New Orleans, a new bill has been introduced that would make wage theft a crime. Currently, stealing wages is just a civil offense. You have to go to small claims court to recover your money. This bill would allow the police to arrest employers who steal wages. Similar local bills are being developed and introduced across the nation.

4) Support comprehensive immigration reform. Passing comprehensive immigration reform so that workers can come out from behind their shadow and stand up for their rights without fear of their employer calling ICE is critical. If we allow 12 million undocumented people to remain in the shadows and continue to allow employers to exploit them, it drives down wages and working conditions for all of us. This process will be tricky. The right wing forces in society have always blamed immigrants for our nation's woes. And in the current economic environment, with ten percent official unemployment, it is going to be even tougher to insist on serious immigration reform, but we must.

5) Support global economic development. Long-term, we must also support the rights of all workers around the world to organize and engage in economic development. Inadequate working conditions worldwide directly impact employment realities in the US. Only when Mexicans and Guatemalans can feed their families will they stop risking crossing the desert, the Jericho road, for jobs. Only when Chinese workers are paid fairly will they stop jeopardizing their lives in containers. Only when teachers in the Philippines are paid living wages will they stop paying thousands of dollars to unethical companies who bring them to teach in Louisiana. If we are serious about helping the immigrant, helping the traveler hurt on the road, then it is essential that we tend existing wounds and create new approaches and structures that will address fundamental injustices in our global society.

Lesson Four: You can be the Good Samaritan. You might not think of yourself as the most likely person to help immigrants, but perhaps you are. You may be thinking, "I'm just a student, what can I do?" "I'm just a professor – I write and think but what can I do?"

No one expected the Samaritan to stop. Samaritans were Gentiles mostly living in Samaria. Jews thought of them as inferior and frankly disliked them. You might not be the person whom everyone expects to help but you might be the person who can and does.

The text says that the Samaritan “was moved with pity” for the man. The Greek word means ‘to feel pity or to sympathize with, to have compassion.’ More than contemporary understandings of the word “pity,” the word, in its biblical context, captures the Samaritan’s righteous indignation and strong desire to help. But the Samaritan felt a deep compassion – to his innards. He was upset and willing to do something about it. He was moved enough to get out of his box – to do more than would be expected of him. My personal view is that the only way to tap and maintain this kind of deep compassion is by personally standing with people in struggle. If you know people, not as distant objects but as friends, colleagues or at least in some personal way, you can feel their issues more deeply. Workers’ concerns must permeate our daily, often too busy, lives.

Perhaps you know someone whose family is divided over immigration policy. You can overcome your fear of politics and advocate for immigration reform in conversations with them. Maybe you’ve talked with an immigrant worker who earns less than what his or her native born co-workers earn; you might consider joining a union rally to support similar workers. If you’ve met with an immigrant worker whose family is being evicted because she hasn’t gotten paid, you can join a delegation to insist that the owner pays workers their wages. You need to make these relationships. You can join a church, synagogue or mosque where workers are struggling. Join the immigrant student organization on campus. Volunteer with Interfaith Worker Justice or the New Orleans Worker Center for Racial justice. You have to feel the pain in your gut. Injustice needs to make you mad. If it doesn’t right now then put yourself in a position where you can hear stories that will transform your worldview. Immigrants’ stories will stoke your anger and compel your compassion. They will push you out of your comfort zone so that you will stop along the road to help someone who has been robbed.

The good news is, just as the Good Samaritan was able to make a difference, so too can you. There are many ways to make a difference for workers right now. I am going to conclude by offering six concrete ways that you can help:

- 1) **Talk about wage theft – people not getting paid is all around you.** Tell workers and family members about wage theft. It is worst for immigrants, but bad for all of us.

2) **Join IWJ's wage theft days of action.** This last fall, forty community organizations, campus groups and congregations organized events to lift up the crisis of wage theft. Future wage theft days of actions will be organized to continue public outreach and education. (For upcoming dates, visit www.wagetheft.org or www.iwj.org.) Do something on the next wage theft day of action: survey workers in ten restaurants; survey 50 students who work jobs off campus; survey 25 congregation members. Plan an event and join Interfaith Worker Justice in publicly denouncing wage theft.

3) **Encourage your senators to support comprehensive immigration reform.**

Workers on the move need comprehensive immigration reform. Contact your Senators encouraging them to support a path to citizenship and strong worker protections for immigrants. Invite your Senators to talk about their positions on comprehensive immigration reform. Send a delegation of students or community leaders to meet with their staffs.

4) **Join the Alternative Break** program focused on immigrants and economic justice in New Orleans, Chicago or almost any other region in the country. IWJ can help you get involved.

5) **Support Local Wage Theft Actions.** There are more than 200 workers centers around the nation. Volunteer to participate in worker actions for recovering wages.

It is an interesting time in our nation's history. Times of crisis determine the kind of nation we want to be and will become. As a nation we have choices. As individuals we have choices. When we've welcomed people, we've grown and prospered. When we've tried to exclude people—Native Americans, African Americans or any immigrant group—we have undermined social standards for all. The Good Samaritan is indeed the story for this moment. You and I can be the Good Samaritan. We can make a difference.

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ⁱ Broken Laws, Unprotected Workers: Violations of Employment and Labor Laws in America's Cities.