



# WORKING FOR DIGNITY

## Living Wages in the Gulf South

BY ALÍ R. BUSTAMANTE, PH.D. AND BRENDAN GOTTSCHALL, S.J.

Catholic social thought (CST) gives us two fundamental principles with regards to wages: first, a just wage must provide “a dignified livelihood” for the worker and his/her family<sup>1</sup>; and, second, government is responsible for protecting the rights of workers.<sup>2</sup> The just wage is thus a living wage and governments have an obligation to promote living wages through minimum wage laws and other labor protections.

Despite this moral imperative for employers and obligation on governments, wages in the Gulf South are among the lowest in the country. More than 1 in 5 workers in the region earn wages at or below \$10 an hour (see *Table 1*). In 2016, the median/typical wage of \$15 per hour in Mississippi was the lowest in the country. Even the highest median wage in the Gulf South of \$16.47 per hour in Texas was well below the national median wage of \$17.42 per hour.

Low wages contribute to deep and pervasive poverty across the Gulf South. In 2016, more than a quarter of residents in the region (over 15.7 million people) had incomes below 150% of the poverty line (see *Table 2*). Without sufficient incomes, “a dignified livelihood” is not within the reach of many working Americans and their families.

The response from state governments in the Gulf South to the injustice of worker poverty has been woefully lacking. State

**Table 1: Wages in the U.S. and the Gulf South: 2016**

State	Median Wage	Share of workers earning \$10/hour or less
Alabama	\$15.75	21.8%
Florida	\$16.03	20.1%
Louisiana	\$16.00	21.8%
Mississippi	\$15.00	26.5%
Texas	\$16.47	20.7%
<b>U.S.</b>	<b>\$17.42</b>	<b>17.8%</b>

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics Current Population Survey 2016

legislators across the South ought to support minimum wage laws and union membership while also strengthening labor protections. In actuality, many state legislatures have made the lives of workers more difficult by passing laws that preempt cities and counties from passing their own local minimum wage laws. As of July 6, 2017, 25 states, including all in the Gulf South, had passed minimum wage preemption laws.<sup>3</sup>

For example, in August 2015, the city council of Birmingham, AL, passed a local minimum wage of \$8.50 per hour to be implemented in July 2016 and increasing to \$10.10 per hour

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**Table 2: Poverty in the U.S. and the Gulf South: 2016**

State	Incomes Below Poverty Line		Incomes Below 150% of Poverty Line	
	Total	Rate	Total	Rate
Alabama	810,231	17.1%	1,299,603	27.4%
Florida	2,973,512	14.7%	5,118,205	25.3%
Louisiana	918,187	20.2%	1,375,335	30.3%
Mississippi	602,768	20.8%	926,662	32.0%
Texas	4,261,337	15.6%	7,032,974	25.8%
<b>U.S.</b>	<b>44,268,996</b>	<b>14.0%</b>	<b>72,375,908</b>	<b>23.0%</b>

Source: U.S. Census American Community Survey 1-year Estimates 2016

starting in July 2017. However, in February 2016, the Alabama state legislature invalidated the Birmingham minimum wage before it could take effect and preempted future local minimum wage laws. In essence, the Alabama legislature voided the will of the people of Birmingham. The latter was devastating to the estimated 40,000 low-wage workers and their families in Birmingham that were expecting raises.<sup>4</sup>

Minimum wage advocacy is necessary, but in a political climate in which state minimum wage laws are unlikely to pass anytime soon, or are actively preempted, local living wage ordinances are a good policy alternative.

Living wage ordinances are essential laws passed at the municipal or county level that require a just wage to be paid to local government employees and/or workers at firms that benefit from a local government contract. Currently in the U.S., over 150 counties or municipalities have living wage ordinances, with wage levels set up to \$20 per hour for workers without health benefits. Most ordinances also tie the living wage to a price index to ensure cost-of-living increases.

Miami-Dade County, FL has the most generous living wage ordinance in the Gulf South. The ordinance provides a living wage rate of \$12.63 per hour with health benefits or \$15.52 per hour if no qualifying health benefit plan is provided. Furthermore, as of 2016, Miami-Dade County’s living wage is annually adjusted for inflation and the employer’s minimum health benefit contribution rises with the inflation rate of medical care.

Since the inception of the Miami-Dade living wage ordinance in 1999, the ordinance clearly states the rationale behind the legislation:

Sub-poverty level wages do not serve the public purpose. Such wages instead place an undue burden on taxpayers and the community to subsidize employers paying inadequate wages by providing their employees social services such as health care, housing, nutrition, and

energy assistance. The County has a responsibility when spending public funds to set a community standard that permits full-time workers to live above the poverty line.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to upholding the dignity of workers, living wage ordinances are also effective economic policy. Local governments spend billions of tax dollars every year with private businesses on service contracts, lease and concession agreements, and economic development incentives and subsidies. Increasingly, local policymakers are asking businesses to deliver tangible economic benefits to their communities in exchange for government spending. By targeting low-wage workers, living wage ordinances increase the incomes of those in or near poverty despite working. The increased incomes result in additional consumer spending at the community level, which benefits local businesses, and in lower poverty rates, which benefit the community as a whole.

Evidence shows that living wage ordinances raise wages for low-income workers, boost local economies, and decrease poverty with few if any measurable negative effects on either employment or taxes.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, increased wages and benefits are associated with lower worker turnover.<sup>7</sup> Lower turnover translates into more experienced workers, with more opportunities for training and learning on the job, which can lead to better work performance.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, living wage ordinances, while targeted to benefit low-wage workers, may also benefit their employers.

Yet, across the Gulf South living wage ordinances are modest in depth and quantity. Living wage ordinances are found in some municipalities across Florida and Texas. However, New Orleans is the only municipality in Louisiana to have a living wage ordinance and no localities in Mississippi or Alabama have enacted living wage ordinances.<sup>9</sup>

Social justice advocates in the Gulf South should consider lobbying for the implementation of living wage ordinances in their municipalities and counties. Additionally, where

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## Catholic Social Thought and Policy Applications

It is important to understand how Catholic social teaching approaches the uses of, and distinctions between, principles and policy applications in Catholic social thought. Then we must consider how we bring these teachings into the public square. The first distinction, made thirty years ago by the U.S. bishops in their pastoral letter on economic justice, is between principle and policy application. For example, there is a principle in Catholic social teaching about the right of workers to receive a decent family wage.<sup>1</sup> That principle is distinct from the question of whether to support a particular minimum wage bill at the federal, state, or local level, which would be a policy application. The bishops indicate that there are an important set of bridges, leading to *prudential judgments*, which guide us from principle to policy applications:

In focusing on some of the central economic issues and choices in American life in the light of moral principles, we are aware that the movement from principle to policy is complex and difficult and that although moral values are essential in determining public policies, they do not dictate specific solutions. They must interact with empirical data, with historical, social, and political realities, and with competing demands on limited resources. The soundness of our prudential judgments depends not only on the moral force of our principles, but also on the accuracy of our information and the validity of our assumptions.<sup>2</sup>

Then, the bishops conclude that because of the bridges from principle to policy applications, their “moral authority” for Catholics is different:

Our judgments and recommendations on specific economic issues, therefore, do not carry the same moral authority as our statements of universal moral principles and formal church teaching; the former are related to circumstances that can change or that can be interpreted differently by people of good will. We expect and welcome debate on our specific policy recommendations. Nevertheless, we want our statements on these matters to be given

serious consideration by Catholics as they determine whether their own moral judgments are consistent with the Gospel and with Catholic social teaching.<sup>3</sup>

The second important distinction, also made in the pastoral letter on economic justice, is in the approach to the audiences whom we address as Church:

We write, then, first of all to provide guidance for members of our own Church as they seek to form their consciences about economic matters. No one may claim the name Christian and be comfortable in the face of the hunger, homelessness, insecurity, and injustice found in this country and the world. At the same time we want to add our voice to the public debate about the directions in which the U.S. economy should be moving. We seek the cooperation and support of those who do not share our faith or tradition. The common bond of humanity that links all persons is the source of our belief that the country can attain a renewed public moral vision.<sup>4</sup>

This distinction affects how we seek to persuade Catholics and others in this pluralistic society. It determines the use of moral reasoning, logic, data, life and ministry experience, official Catholic teaching, and even the Scriptures. With Catholics, we make an appeal to Church teaching and conscience, recognizing the distinction between principle and policy application, but urging careful consideration of the policy applications. With “people of the book,” the appeal should include references to Scripture. With other-than-Catholics, the Church often appeals to reason and human dignity, widely accepted values and principles, and a hope that the evidence compiled in the bridges to policy application are convincing in themselves.

### ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Pope Leo XIII. (1891). *Rerum Novarum: On the Condition of Labor*, 63. Saint John Paul II. (1981). *Laborem Exercens: On Human Work*, 19.
- <sup>2</sup> National Conference of Catholic Bishops. (1986). *Economic Justice for All: Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy*, 134.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 135.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 27.

# MARKERS OF PLENTY

## Race, Ethnicity, Gender, and Wages in Louisiana

BY NIK MITCHELL, PH.D.

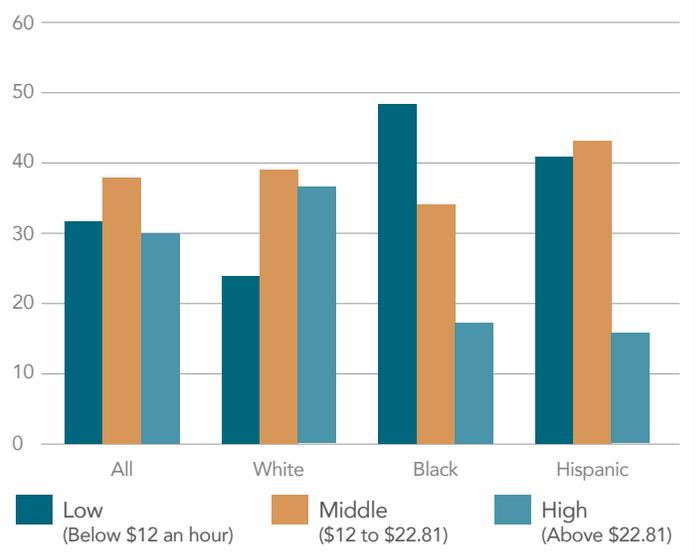
In his landmark work *Black Reconstruction*, W.E.B. DuBois wrote about the American class structure following the Civil War, “The proletariat is usually envisaged as united, but their real interests were represented in America by four sets of people: the freed Negro, the Southern poor white, and the Northern skilled and unskilled laborer.”<sup>1</sup> Using DuBois’s lens, this article seeks to complicate the social conversation about income inequality by examining Louisiana’s wage data intersectionally. The six intersecting racial and gender groups—white males, black males, Hispanic males, white females, black females, and Hispanic females—are categorized as belonging to one of three wage brackets: low, middle, or high.

For this report, low wages earners are defined as those whose hourly wages fall below \$12 whereas middle wage earners’ hourly wages fall between \$12 and \$22.81 and high wage earners’ hourly wages are above \$22.81. For an individual working 40 hours per week, excluding the impact of local and federal taxes, a low wage earner makes less than \$24,960 a year, a middle wage earner makes between \$24,960 and \$47,444.80 a year, and a high wage earner makes over \$47,444.80 a year.

Examined as a whole, 31.9% of wage earners in Louisiana qualify as low wage earners, 38.1% qualify as middle wage earners, and 30% qualify as high wage earners. When examined racially, the wage gap becomes evident, as shown in *Figure 1*<sup>2</sup>.

48.6% of black workers and 41% of Hispanic workers qualify as low wage earners compared to 24% of white workers; black and Hispanic workers’ representation among low wage workers is 16.8% and 9.2% higher than the state average,

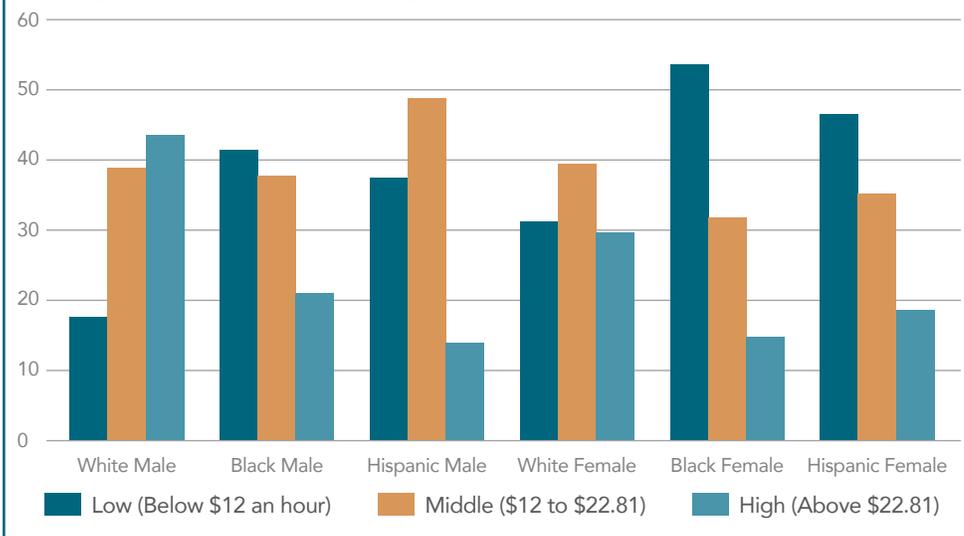
**Figure 1: Louisiana Wage Percentiles by Race**



respectively, while white workers’ representation falls 7.9% below the state average. Black and Hispanic workers’ representation among high wage earners is 12.8% and 14.4% lower than the state average of 30%, respectively, while white workers’ representation is 6.7% higher than the state average.

When the data are disaggregated by race and gender, as in *Figure 2*<sup>3</sup>, they confirm the existence of intersectional wage gaps in Louisiana. Black males, Hispanic males, black females, and Hispanic females are over represented among low wage earners by 9.5%, 5.6%, 21.7%, and 14.4% above the state average, respectively, while white males are under represented by 14.6%. Black women have the highest share of low wage earners at 53.6% of all wage

**Figure 2: Louisiana Wage Percentiles by Race and Gender**



earners; this means that over half of working black women in Louisiana make less than \$24,960 a year. Among female groups, white women have the lowest share of low wage earners at 31.1% along with the highest shares of middle wage earners at 39.5% and high wage earners at 29.5%.

Some point to increased education attainment as being key to closing the racial wage gap, but the data show that the racial-gender wage gap continues when education attainment levels are taken into account. The Equal Justice Initiative asserts that, “Just completing a bachelor’s degree or more will not reduce the black-white wage gap.”<sup>4</sup> Table 1 shows the median wage for those with bachelors’ degrees or higher by race and gender intersection:

**Table 1: Louisiana hourly wage averages for Black and White wage earners holding a bachelor’s degree or higher by gender<sup>5</sup>**

Wage Earners	Hourly Wage Averages
All	\$25.00
White	\$26.00
Black	\$22.00
White Male	\$30.00
Black Male	\$22.73
White Female	\$23.65
Black Female	\$21.10

The data show that in Louisiana, the racial disparity in wages evident in Figures 1 and 2 continues with people who have bachelor’s degrees or higher, although the gaps close in size.

Examined as a whole, the wage data indicate that a structural economic inequality between communities of color and white communities exists in Louisiana which is so pronounced

that the class structures are inherently different. There is no single class structure in Louisiana but rather there are “raced classes” within the broader class structure (e.g. black middle income earners versus white middle income earners, etc.). Wage gaps exist and serve as both quantitative and qualitative evidence of the persistence of systemic economic racism and sexism in the United States and, specifically, in Louisiana. The same results can be found in other states as well.

Based on the over representation of men and women of color among low wage earners compared to the state average, systemic racism and sexism are important social and economic factors in Louisiana. Reports released by the Equal Justice Initiative, the Pew Research Center, and the Jesuit Social Research Institute all confirm that there is a racial wage gap in the United States.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, the Institute for Women’s Policy Research asserts that if all current trends remained constant, the wage gap between men and women would not close until 2059 and 2115 for the United States and Louisiana, respectively.<sup>7</sup> Nationally, Pew reports that “Looking at gender, race and ethnicity combined, all groups, with the exception of Asian men, lag behind white men in terms of median hourly earnings.”<sup>8</sup> These gaps are more than just aggregate data; they reflect the quality of life of millions of people.

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# WHAT TO DO AFTER WELCOMING?

## Immigration and Moral Dilemmas

BY RAFAEL GARCÍA, S.J.

Moral dilemmas force flexibility and creativity and reveal the fact that human laws are never without exceptions. One of these relates to the plight of migrants and refugees—the recently arrived and those established in our communities.

The Catholic Church, other Churches, many elected leaders, and people of good will support welcoming those whose lives are threatened by criminal elements or are fleeing war or systemic impoverishment. They have a right to migrate to save their lives and find a safe home, according to Catholic social teaching and human solidarity. The United States is one of those safe homes. The welcome is needed!

But once here, new challenges arise. How are those welcomed going to survive and provide for their families if they are legally prohibited from securing work? Is this major dilemma being adequately acknowledged and addressed by church and state? Those of us in ministry with migrants and refugees constantly see the detrimental effects of the *status quo* regarding illegality of working. Lack of work typically triggers many other problems that create individual and family deterioration.

The Church teaches that denial of work is a violation of a person's rights:

Work is a fundamental right and a good for mankind, a useful good, worthy of man because it is an

appropriate way for him to give expression to and enhance his human dignity ... Work is needed to form and maintain a family, to have a right to property, to contribute to the common good of the human family.<sup>1</sup>

Unemployment, on the other hand, is a "real social disaster."<sup>2</sup>

Pope Francis prophetically addressed this dehumanizing *status quo* in his recent message for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees (January 14, 2018). He called for a 'four-step' response to the crisis of forced migration: welcome; protect; promote; integrate. Francis wrote:

When duly recognized and valued, the potential and skills of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees are a true resource for the communities that welcome them... This is why I hope that, in countries of arrival, migrants may be offered freedom of movement, work opportunities, and access to means of communication, out of respect for their dignity.<sup>3</sup>

Since work is essential to dignity, Francis also urged "a determined effort to promote the social and professional inclusion of migrants and refugees, guaranteeing for all—including those seeking asylum—the opportunity for employment..."<sup>4</sup>

U.S. law prohibits undocumented immigrants from working. Obviously, many do find work, some due to courageous risk-taking by good, humanitarian employers. Others get work, but from unscrupulous labor contractors who mistreat and often force undocumented workers into slave-like working and living conditions. There are a multitude of other work situations.

Catholic social teaching acknowledges a moral dilemma when the rights of people seeking asylum interface with the rights of nations to control their borders. Solving this dilemma should move one to solidarity and the common good, not the letter of the law. In *Strangers No Longer, Together on the Journey of Hope*, the U.S. and Mexican Bishops wrote:

The Church recognizes the right of sovereign nations to control their territories but rejects such control when it is exerted merely for the purpose of acquiring additional wealth. More powerful economic nations, which have the ability to protect and feed their residents, have a stronger obligation to accommodate migration flows.<sup>5</sup>

Welcoming without adequate follow-up, sadly, also occurs with some in the “pro-life,” or more specifically, “pro-birth” movement. A consistent ethic of life recognizes that the willful destruction of unborn human life is an evil. Concern for a vulnerable life seems to change, though, once the baby has been “welcomed” into the world. Once born, an impoverished child and family face harsh policies that can eliminate crucial nutritional aid and pediatric care, policies very often supported by the same anti-abortion persons.

Catholic morality teaches that, if a person suffers hunger and the only way to get food is by unauthorized taking of it, this action should not be judged as stealing:

The seventh commandment forbids theft, that is, usurping another's property against the reasonable will of the owner. There is no theft if consent can be presumed or if refusal is contrary to reason and the universal destination of goods. This is the case in obvious and urgent necessity when the only way to provide for immediate, essential needs (food, shelter, clothing . . .) is to put at one's disposal and use the property of others.<sup>6</sup>

The emergency taking of food, however, is not a structural, institutional answer to extreme hunger. Similarly, permission to work needs a structural solution. This requires modifications in present laws. Freedom to work will be fruitful for many: the individual's dignity and ability to be productive; the family; civil society; and the tax system.

Although this is still an unfolding, unchartered reality, what will happen to the 800,000 or so DACA protected young people if they definitively lose their protection and

possibilities to work, study, and continue to be productive? Unable to work or study, will they go “underground”? This sudden free fall into “illegality” will be catastrophic psychologically, spiritually, and emotionally—catastrophic, also, for the life and economy of the nation. Where are they to go if they were brought to the U.S. as minor children? How are they supposed to make a livelihood?

Until lawmakers acknowledge and act on this dilemma and change laws, how can pro-life, pro-immigrant, pro-human dignity persons reach out to help these vulnerable families secure a livelihood? A true and consistent commitment to life demands astute and effective advocacy from people of faith. Human decency demands that lawmakers create new, realistic, life-respecting paths for those who are undocumented. This includes a path to work.

J. Kevin Appleby of the Center for Migration Studies recently laid out a “Catholic's immigration wish list” to create these paths:

- (1) a pathway to citizenship for the 11 million undocumented immigrants in the United States;
- (2) reform of the legal immigration system to increase efficiency and ensure that the United States can meet its labor demand;
- (3) strengthening the asylum system by ensuring due process protections, especially for unaccompanied minors;
- (4) removal of actual criminals, rather than enforcement against the vast majority of undocumented immigrants who are not criminal threats; and
- (5) addressing the push factors that force migrants to come to the United States, instead of building a wall along the US-Mexico border.<sup>7</sup>

With our consistent teaching on respect for life and family, we Catholics should be much more effective advocates to resolve the crucial dilemma of immigrants and work through comprehensive immigration reform.

*Father Rafael García, SJ, is Associate Pastor of Sacred Heart Parish in El Paso, Texas and an Associate of JSRI*



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- <sup>2</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>3</sup> Pope Francis. (2017). Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the 104<sup>th</sup> World Day of Migrants and Refugees.
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- <sup>6</sup> Libreria Editrice Vaticana. (1964) *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2408.
- <sup>7</sup> J. Kevin Appleby. (2017, December 25). A Catholic's immigration wish list. *America*, 10.

6363 St. Charles Avenue, Box 94  
New Orleans, LA 70118-6143

(504) 864-7746  
jsri@loyno.edu  
www.loyno.edu/jsri

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living wage ordinances exist, advocates should push local policymakers to bring ordinances closer to national best practices. While the benefits may be limited compared to minimum wage laws at the national or state level, the barriers to passage are lower on the local level. Furthermore, the CST principle of subsidiarity teaches that the common good ought to be pursued at the lowest effective level. Living wage ordinances are thus at the intersection of two important tenets of CST -- just wages and subsidiarity.

### ENDNOTES

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