

A FAIR BALANCE
THE BIBLE, ECONOMICS,
AND JUSTICE FOR WORKERS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

***A Four-Session Study and Discussion Curriculum
From Durham Congregations In Action***

by Spencer Bradford and Josiah Daniels

Image: "The Labor Cross," 1954, Fritz Eichenberg (1901-90), Wood engraving, 16 x 12 in.

A FAIR BALANCE

Introduction

The Civil Rights Movement, with its organizing base in African-American churches, and strong leadership from black clergy that eventually extended into the ranks of diverse white ministers, not only accomplished legal and cultural changes to relieve racist treatment of African-Americans, but shifted the framework of engagement between religion and politics. The Southern Protestant paradigm of “religion=personal, but politics & business =public, and a wall of segregation between the two” was shaken and shattered. (The depth and extent of that paradigm goes far beyond Southern Protestantism, but that is the closer context in which the authors grew up and that has shaped our location in Durham, NC). Successive cultural waves of national electronic media and expansive secularity left many Christians in the South, of all races, uncertain or oriented in different directions regarding the relationship of their faith to the realms of economics, government policy, and business.

Early in my social ministry career, I had a conversation with a devout, generous Methodist laywoman who was very committed to her affluent congregation and to poverty relief ministries in her community. We were discussing Paul’s urging to the Corinthians to share their resources with the Jerusalem church (2 Cor. 8) and his use of the manna story from Exodus 16 to hold up the principle that those who have much ought not have too much and those with little not have too little, but all should have enough for their needs. Paul did not propose this as a punishment or burden for prosperity, but so that there would be “a fair balance.” I suggested that, in light of other scriptural teachings, this principle not only expressed the nature of mutual care in the Spirit of Jesus that members of churches should pursue toward each other, but a principle of divine justice accessible to the wider society to build up the common good for all. This committed congregational leader responded that Paul clearly meant this as an appeal to individual, personal charity, and not systemic institutional change, and so this call to charity should not be seen as a moral rule, let alone a political principle.

This was not the first time I’d encountered this perspective. It was the perspective that saw no connection between God’s liberation of the Hebrew slaves from Egypt, Paul’s self-identification with the runaway slave Onesimus (Philemon 12-17), and a theological subversion of the foundation of institutional slavery. It was the perspective I still heard among some white Christians growing up that disconnected “love your neighbor” from racial discrimination. But in this conversation, it came home to me in a new way that this woman (and many others with her) especially saw matters of money and economics in this framework. They would never claim that because Jesus taught “you shall not kill” meant “do not be angry with your neighbor” (Matt. 5:21-22), Christians should only enjoin voluntary self-control and peaceableness upon our community, and have no interest in laws against assault and murder. They would never claim that because Jesus taught adultery included even lust after another in one’s heart, Christians should have no interest in the nature of divorce laws and the workings of family courts. But with regard to economic inequity and disparities, they could only see biblical ethics enjoining personal charity, and not moral duty or social justice principles.

Different churches have had different accounts about the relationship between Scriptural teachings about moral practice for Christians and principles of public justice for law and business. The material in these study guides does not propose to address directly or explain that relationship, but does assume that the goods of God’s kingdom can inform and should influence our structures and systems of economic justice for workers at least as much as our systems of laws related to violence, theft, and marriage. Particularly, a robust understanding of the commandment to respect Sabbath, on par with the commandments in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 against murder, theft, and adultery, may help relieve the pervasive blindness to connections between our faith-based, ethical convictions about the goods of God’s Kingdom and the economic goods available to our civic institutions and public systems now. It is past time that Paul’s “fair balance” became a measure of our practice for worker protections and rights.

In 2012, organizers for workers’ rights campaigns in the Triangle area of NC began contacting Durham Congregations In Action (DCIA) as an avenue for reaching spiritual communities about their work. A number of

congregations in our constituency had been involved in support for FLOC's Mt. Olives Pickles boycott in the 1990s for farmworkers, and DCIA had maintained a connection with farmworker organizers as part of our anti-poverty focus. So engaging a broader range of workers' rights campaigns was not a huge leap for our anti-poverty agenda, at least in principle. But in the state of North Carolina, with its history of violent (and successful) suppression of union organizing in the early 20th century, it was a significant cultural step beyond DCIA's long-time organizing of charitable poverty relief and support for education and a social safety-net. And it became more apparent to me how very many Christians in churches did not have the tools or perspective to relate their personal faith convictions and the Bible, with real spiritual depth, to the issues of fair treatment, protection, and compensation for workers.

DCIA is an interreligious organization with constituents from a variety of Christian and non-Christian traditions. But this need seemed particularly present with Protestant Christian congregations (in which I am included), and we had access to the Duke Divinity School, an ecumenically Methodist theological institution. So I undertook to engage two Duke Divinity School students in exploring and developing strategies to help and support churches in building up connections between their faith and labor rights campaigns. With each, I provided some introductory resources on the economy and labor for study and review, some central theological points we would bridge together, and an outline of elements we wanted to address, and each responded with good contributions. During 2013-2014, Kevin Portwood worked through initial drafts of a presentation series, and co-presented with me our first version of one session about farmworkers and other low-wage workers, and prepared outlines for discussion sessions with resources and instructions. He prepared the first version of a discussion series with a variety of outside resources as educational elements, several of which are included in the resource appendix to this study guide. I greatly appreciate the groundwork he prepared, his prayers, and his reflections on communicating about these issues with people in the pews.

In the summer of 2014, Josiah Daniels worked with me collaboratively on this more intensive, text-based study guide for church groups to use, to provide in one document a teaching resource for teachers and leaders with to use with groups. We used some of Kevin's resources as a starting point, but organized our work around more extensive economic analysis and biblical interpretation for groups that would use this. Josiah's strong writing skills, ability to synthesize lots of economic data and analysis thrown at him, scriptural insights and faith-grounded passion for social justice made collaboration on this resource successful. His receptivity to and responses to the elements I wrote improved and sharpened the outcome.

That God would send two young Texans from evangelical churches to work with a formerly-Southern-Baptist Mennonite on spiritual foundations for workers' rights advocacy is evidence not only of the impassible strangeness of God's providence, but of the power of the voice of God's Spirit in the biblical tradition on behalf of the poor. For a number of years, DCIA has identified its mission priorities with the triple evils identified by Martin Luther King Jr., toward the end of his life, as confronting American society: poverty, racism and violence. Many Americans do not realize that Dr. King met his martyrdom in 1968 in Memphis, TN, for the sake of supporting sanitation workers on strike there (some of the lowest paid workers in the city), and that he was developing a national economic justice campaign when he was assassinated. A fair balance for workers was part of the Beloved Community that Dr. King sought, the Promised Land toward which he heard God's voice calling even though he would not see it accomplished among us in this life.

It is that Voice that we hope these study guides will clarify to be heard, and followed.

Spencer Bradford
DCIA Executive Director
August 2014

Unit 1: SABBATH AND THE DIGNITY OF LABOR

Opening Prayer

Dear God, open our eyes to the struggles of your people around us. Teach us your ways and the redemptive plans that you have for all people. You desire so much more for your children than this world presently offers. Help us to be the Church that proclaims the truth of your love and transformation. Listen to our voices as they cry out to you, and bring the Sabbath of your Kingdom's rule. Turn your ear to the oppressed and the mistreated. Be the source of our strength to hope for light in the darkness. We trust this work into your loving, almighty hands, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Scripture

Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. For six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.

Deuteronomy 5:12-15 (CEB)

Every seventh year you shall grant a remission of debts. And this is the manner of the remission: every creditor shall remit the claim that is held against a neighbor, not exacting it of a neighbor who is a member of the community, because the Lord's remission has been proclaimed . . . There will, however, be no one in need among you, because the Lord is sure to bless you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a possession to occupy, if only you will obey the Lord your God by diligently observing this entire commandment that I command you today. When the Lord your God has blessed you, as he promised you, you will lend to many nations, but you will not borrow; you will rule over many nations, but they will not rule over you. If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be. Be careful that you do not entertain a mean thought, thinking, "The seventh year, the year of remission, is near," and therefore view your needy neighbor with hostility and give nothing; your neighbor might cry to the Lord against you, and you would incur guilt. Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, "Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land."

Deuteronomy 15:1-2, 4-11 (NRSV)

America is one of the most prosperous nations in the entire world. Millions have come to this country to realize their dreams of prosperity, security, and acceptance. America continues to be a leader in the world economically and culturally. The overarching narrative in the United States is that hard work leads to the reward of prosperity through financial independence. But this is not the reality for many Americans.

In 2014, almost 50 million Americans live below the official poverty line, and tens of millions more struggle on the margins of poverty, finding that they have little or no access to the prosperity and economic security enjoyed by others. It is common for people in this category to be characterized as lazy

and unambitious (often in racialized stereotypes). But for most adults in poverty, such a characterization is both untrue and unfair. These are America's working poor. They are a group of people across all races who, despite their best efforts, cannot achieve economic security. This may be the case even though they are working multiple jobs, spending very little, and receiving government and charitable assistance to supplement their earnings. And recent research calculates that as many as 54% of us fall into this group during the course of our working lives.¹

Our Context – Current Hardship and Disparities

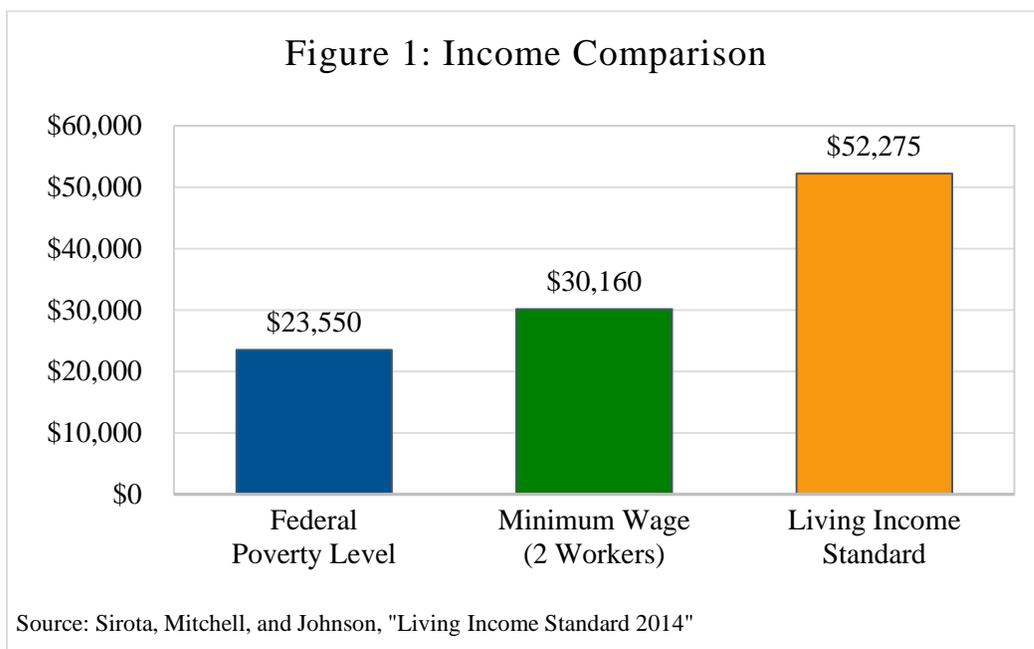
The U.S. government officially defines poverty as \$23,850 for a family of four, or \$15,730 for a single parent with one child.² At the current federal minimum wage of \$7.25 per hour, that single parent would have to work overtime or two jobs just to reach poverty income, let alone begin to escape poverty. Most often, those belonging to the working poor hold multiple jobs in order to be able to provide the basics—food, housing, education, and healthcare—and often times these multiple incomes are not enough. To help make ends meet, the working poor often require government assistance, although the majority of families receive federal assistance for less than two years.³ Less than 24% of minimum wage workers are teenagers today. Roughly half of minimum-wage employees are over 25 years old, and a quarter are between 35 to 64 years old.⁴

Where has this class of people come from? The answer to this question comes to us in the events happening between 1979 and today. During this thirty-five year period the American economy experienced profound changes. Middle-class manufacturing jobs increasingly moved overseas, healthcare and education costs skyrocketed, and corporations and financial sectors were continually deregulated. Furthermore, even as employee productivity was soaring to an 85% increase, wages for middle and low paying jobs grew very slowly, if not remaining stagnant. Meanwhile, the top one percent of wage earners in the United States received 53.9% of the total increase in income between 1979 and 2011.⁵ One aspect of this growing inequality in America has been the drop in the value of the minimum wage, which peaked in 1968 at \$8.54 in today's dollars (adjusted for inflation), and has never recovered that buying power. Another factor in that trend is that the portion of the U.S. workforce employed with union coverage has decreased from 26.7% in 1973 to 13.1% in 2011.⁶

The results of this income disparity dynamic are clear: there is a glut of low-income wage earners that have no alternatives to their current working situation that will provide them with economic security. Instead of being able to use low paying jobs as a stepping stone to other employment, increasingly, the working poor are finding that their upward mobility is limited by the sheer numbers of hours they must work to scrape by. At the same time, government policies encourage more allocation of economic revenue to the financial sector and executives than to middle- and low-income workers whose productivity has generated real economic growth. If the minimum wage had been indexed to the Consumer Price Index at the same level of buying power it had in 1968, adjusted for inflation, today it would be \$10.52 (hence the bipartisan support in 2014 for legislating a minimum wage increase up to \$10.10). But if the minimum wage had tracked average *productivity growth* of labor (the way the minimum wage did from 1945 to 1968, when the American middle class saw dramatic expansion and prosperity growth), that wage would be \$21.72 *per hour*. If even half those gains went to the lowest-earning workers, the minimum wage still would be almost \$16 per hour.⁷ But almost all those gains went to increased income and wealth for investors and top earners instead. The rising tide of productivity and prosperity during the past 40 years has not lifted all the boats in our economy, but only a relative few. We do not see a "fair balance" between abundance and need (2 Cor. 8:14).

The North Carolina Justice Center's Living Income Standard (LIS) report details the difficulties faced by many of the working poor. According to the report, the income thresholds published by the

U.S. Census Bureau as a measure of poverty are deceptively low and do not account for many costs associated with having a family. In North Carolina, for a family of four to provide for only their necessities, which includes housing, transportation, child care, food (on an almost meat-free diet with no meals outside of home), family members must together make \$25.13 an hour (\$52,275 yearly combined). And this is not an easy life—the LIS does not account for emergency expenditures or any expenses beyond what is categorized as a necessity. Figure 1 illustrates the disparity between what a family can earn at the federal poverty level or at minimum wage and what it actually takes to survive in North Carolina according to the Living Income Standard. Startlingly, a full 84 percent of North Carolinians live below the LIS for their family makeup.⁸ So a great number more of us are struggling on the brink of poverty, though we aren't defined as poor by the government, and though we don't believe we are poor because we're earning regular income.



God's Testimony: The Sabbath and Workers' Rights

The Ten Commandments have always been understood by Christians as abiding moral principles for us to follow (Mark 10:19, Romans 13:9). Christians have argued about how to apply and practice most of the precepts, but we have continued to affirm them. The Sabbath commandment, to observe the Sabbath day each week as a day of rest from labor for everyone, is one of those. Because the gospels describe Jesus defying customary practice of the Sabbath as authorities interpreted it in his time, Christians sometimes regard this command as not significant, but many understand Jesus did not mean to abolish Sabbath practices. It's often understood in our time as instruction to take a day apart from routine activities for spiritual renewal, remembering our dependence on God's care as the source of life and good prior to our own busy-ness. That is a valuable aspect of the commandment, but not the only one that registers its continued relevance. Just as the commandment against stealing requires us to look at credit card fraud and investment fraud today in a way that applies ancient principles in new contexts, so we need to look at the principles and message at work in the Sabbath commandment for our context, and not just assume it's about whether God is happy with us mowing the lawn, feeding chickens, or playing golf on Sunday.

Many of us haven't thought about Sabbath in the following way, but the Sabbath command indicates God's inclusion of worker protection and natural resource protection as holy priorities, on par with commands for care for family, truthfulness, marital faithfulness, and the protection of life from violence. Worker rights protections go back to Moses. The commandment, as it is recorded in both Exodus 20:8-11 and in Deut. 5:12-15, instructs that *everyone* – including the lowest ranking laborers, slaves and migrants – was intended to have rest and relief from labor each week. It also includes nonhuman creatures, the animals who serve as natural resources for economic prosperity (and so points to the protection of natural resources in the Sabbath and Jubilee years, during which the soil was to be left fallow for restoration). This weekly practice was to remind the community that in God's eyes, all of us have equal dignity and value that exceeds the value of the property we own, our income, or our status as owner or laborer. In remembering how God freed the Hebrew slaves and introduced Sabbath, we are reminded that God means to deliver people from economic oppression to a shared abundance, and we are called to identify with those slaves in a way that would prevent such gross inequities and oppression in our own communities.

Through the regular practice of Sabbath each week, God calls us to relate to each other and to renew our vision of one another based on God's care and provision for all of us together, not on the basis of who has wealth accumulated to allow leisure or who has to labor for income each week for necessities. Our value in God's eyes, and our value in each other's eyes, has a base and measure apart from what we produce or sell, own or owe. On the Sabbath day, our maximizing productivity, profit, consumption and accumulation all ceases, signifying that our human lives in all stations have a more important value and purpose. The Sabbath perspective will shape our conduct and practices during the rest of the week as well. The Sabbath command is God's strict limitation on the value the market can dictate for our lives, and frames our values in economic practice during our other days also.

This command presumes and orients us toward an economy where there is enough for everyone to have a day of rest, without anxiety about enough to eat. The command was not meant to create burdens and anxieties about basic needs or about God's approval toward the poorest who need Sabbath rest the most. It is not meant to create guilt in those who find themselves having to work ten days in a row to pay the rent, but directs those with resources to provide equal rest to workers and dependents who rely on them. The Sabbath points us to protections that supply enough to workers so that they have that regular time off, and so points to the struggles by the labor movement in 20th century America for a 40-hour work-week, because God has supplied enough shared prosperity to merit that for all.

The Ten Commandments are a set of principles not limited to practice by ancient Israel. The Sabbath command in Exodus 20:11 refers back to God's institution of the Sabbath in the cosmic order of creation as described in Genesis 2:2-3. Theologically, this teaches us that God created order and good (Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31) in the cosmos for the purpose of celebrating Sabbath abundance with all creation. God's divine purpose of Sabbath abundance, enough for rest and celebration for all (even for God!), is meant for all.

Our Witness: Beyond Charity to Justice in Systems

God's focus on economic equity in the Sabbath command is demonstrated in the associated laws for Sabbath years that address debt forgiveness, emancipation from slavery, land resource management and capital property redistribution. Looking forward in the scriptures from the Decalogue, the weekly Sabbath is the seed and sign for all the economic justice provisions of the Old Testament, in Sabbath year and Jubilee protections for the poor and against the accumulation and concentration of wealth by too few. For instance, Deuteronomy 15:1-11 shows us the direction of Sabbath protection for workers in poverty. These instructions are not just ancient agrarian laws or rituals that would burden us with

unnecessary obligations today, but Sabbath principles that teach us profound truths about God’s purposes and our economic practices for our times. When this Sabbath-year passage states a seemingly impractical rule that God’s people must remove all debts owed every seventh year, we often forget that this moral principle of debt forgiveness led to bankruptcy laws and the ending of debtor prisons, mitigating the oppressive power that debt exercises disproportionately over the poor. Deuteronomy 15:11 indicates that the continual challenge of poverty is not justification for giving up on the goal of equity, but the reason that the laws protecting and sustaining the poor are needed.

In Deuteronomy 15, we see that while individual Israelites are instructed to be gracious and sympathetic, the social system is also set up so as to automatically release people from the prison of poverty as a matter of right. Many of us have focused our understanding and practice of Sabbath entirely on individual observance as a matter of personal sanctity and faith, rather than on the social practice of the economic principles at the root of the command. Faith in God’s purpose of “enough for all” is not so much belief that God will miraculously provide for my individual need if I stop working for a day by myself, but rather trusting God’s provision of enough such that together we can adapt our social behavior to the Sabbath principles of equity. The Sabbath laws address not only individual obedience and dispositions for relying on God and sharing with one’s neighbors (which are also aspects of Sabbath spirituality), but also instruct us in principles for organizing the community’s economic and political structures in order to provide enough for all. The principles in the Ten Commandments against murder, theft, and false witness have proven to be relevant in legislation in our secular society, and just so Sabbath principles of economic protection and equity for the poor also should be relevant for our laws.

The American narrative is one of self-made people. We believe that if people were only to work hard enough, they would receive their dues. We thus shift the burden of responsibility in poverty to the individual and away from the economic system. However, in the Sabbath instructions, we see that God not only cares about individual persons, but about the kinds of economic structures that shape our lives. It was important to God, as the Israelites were about to become a landed people, that the economic system they created maintain the liberation from slavery that God had brought in the exodus from Egypt.

The present direction of our economic system does not offer such hope for millions of us. When we look into it, we do not see the liberation of people and the flourishing of life, but instead see persons oppressed by low earnings, high educational debt, under-water mortgages and little opportunity. As people of faith, our first allegiance is not to political parties or ideologies, but to God and God’s kingdom vision. We are confronted with a stark challenge here to our presumptions about the poor and their place in the world. Deuteronomy has nothing to say here about the culpability of the poor in their situation. Rather, it says clearly and unwaveringly that the economy of God’s people is one that frees the poor from economic enslavement, rather than turning a blind eye to those systems that perpetuate poverty. This is God’s call to us in the Sabbath principles: to relieve the burdens of struggling laborers and protect their dignity, in witness that we are all equal in the eyes of the God who liberates from slavery. In keeping with the Sabbath tradition, a society as prosperous and abundant as ours must ensure that workers earn living wages. “Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute. Speak out, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy.” (Proverbs 31:8-9).

Discussion

1. Imagine that you make minimum wage, or that you and one other in your household each earn that. How many hours a week would you have to work to pay for basic needs, accounting only for transportation, childcare, food, medical expenses, and housing? What luxuries would you give up that you enjoy now? How would such a shift affect your feelings about yourself?

2. The Deuteronomy passage suggests that God cares deeply not only about persons, but also about the economic structures under which they live. What principles expressed in Sabbath commands do you already see at work in our laws? Where do the commands show our economy falling short of God’s purposes for us?
3. Basic rights for all workers in the U.S. have been understood to include: limited work hours (40 hours/week unless overtime rates are paid) to ensure time off; fair wages, paid in full and on schedule; safety in the workplace; and the right to organize and assemble (to form union representation). Which of those do you think are effectively protected in our economy for the lowest-paid workers? Are there rights or protections you would add?
4. What are you willing to do to bring change? What other resources can you think of in Scripture that speak directly to the economic realities of everyday humans and how does this influence your answer?
5. How can your congregation make economic liberation a part of its worship, discipleship, and mission?

Notes

¹ Rank, Mark. “Poverty in America is Mainstream,” *New York Times*, Nov. 2, 2013.

² Federal Register Notice, DHHS, January 22, 2014.

³ Pamela J. Loprest, “How Has the TANF Caseload Changed over Time? Urban Institute online, online at <http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/412565-How-Has-the-TANF-Caseload-Changed-Over-Time.pdf>; “Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program,” *Feeding America*, online at <http://feedingamerica.org/how-we-fight-hunger/advocacy-public-policy/policy-center/federal-anti-hunger-programs-and-policies/~media/Files/programs-pdf/snap-program-overview.ashx>; Stephen B. Page and Mary B. Lerner, “Introduction to the AFDC Program” *Future of Children*, online at http://futureofchildren.org/futureofchildren/publications/docs/07_01_01.pdf.

⁴ Picchi, Aimee, “Who Actually Earns the Minimum Wage?” *CBS News Moneywatch*, June 11, 2014.

⁵ Estelle Sommeiller and Mark Price, “The Increasingly Unequal States of America Income Inequality by State, 1917 to 2011,” *The Economic Policy Institute*, Feb 19, 2014, online at <http://www.epi.org/publication/unequal-states/>.

⁶ “State of Working America, 12th ed.” *Economic Policy Institute*, November 2012.

⁷ Schmitt, John. “Minimum Wage: Catching Up to Productivity,” *Democracy: A Journal of Ideas*, Summer 2013.

⁸ Alexandra Sirota, Tazra Mitchell, and Cedric Johnson, “Living Income Standard 2014: Boom in Low-Wage Work Means Many North Carolinians Don’t Make an Adequate Income,” *North Carolina Justice Center*, June 2014, online at <http://www.ncjustice.org/?q=budget-and-tax/living-income-standard-2014-boom-low-wage-work-means-many-north-carolinians-dont-make>.

Unit 2: FARMWORKERS AND ABUNDANT FIELDS

Opening Prayer

God of grace, you are the one who bring rains on the earth, and make it soil produce abundantly. You are the earth's first farmer, calling vibrant life into existence from its barrenness. You are also the God of justice who hears the cries of the oppressed, sets the captives free, and rescues the downtrodden. We pray to you, O Lord, that you would continue to breathe life into your earth and attend to the needs of the forgotten. We ask that by your Holy Spirit, you would empower your people to see as you see and to stand with you and the marginalized, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Scripture

The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. After he agreed with the workers to pay them a denarion, he sent them into his vineyard. "Then he went out around nine in the morning and saw others standing around the marketplace doing nothing. He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I'll pay you whatever is right.' And they went. "Again around noon and then at three in the afternoon, he did the same thing. Around five in the afternoon he went and found others standing around, and he said to them, 'Why are you just standing around here doing nothing all day long?' " 'Because nobody has hired us,' they replied. "He responded, 'You also go into the vineyard.' "When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, 'Call the workers and give them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and moving on finally to the first.' When those who were hired at five in the afternoon came, each one received a denarion. Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more. But each of them also received a denarion. When they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, 'These who were hired last worked one hour, and they received the same pay as we did even though we had to work the whole day in the hot sun.' "But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I did you no wrong. Didn't I agree to pay you a denarion? Take what belongs to you and go. I want to give to this one who was hired last the same as I give to you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with what belongs to me? Or are you resentful because I'm generous?' So those who are last will be first. And those who are first will be last."

Matthew 20:1-16 (CEB)

Agriculture is the most important industry in North Carolina. It contributes \$59 billion to the economy every year and accounts for 22% of the state's income. As a state, NC leads the nation in the production of several crops, including tobacco, sweet potatoes, and Christmas trees.¹ When most of us picture what a modern farm is like, we imagine large fields of corn and wheat being tended by a small group of farmers on large green tractors, leading a hard but good life thanks to the benefits of technology.

Our Context: The Struggles of Farmworkers

One is unlikely to find such an idyllic situation in North Carolina: 85 percent of all the crops in North Carolina must be harvested by hand. This means that North Carolina has a large migrant farmworker population that made up of 150,000 workers and their dependents. So what is life like for these people? In 2011, the organization Student Action with Farmworkers produced the documentary *Harvest of Dignity* in order to shine a spotlight on the lives of North Carolina's farmworkers and their families. Its primary focus is to educate the populace about the living and working conditions of our farmworkers. This section of the documentary opens with a mother talking about her work in the farms and then goes on to describe some of the many problems that farmworkers face in North Carolina.

Harvest of Dignity (cue clip from 4:40-12:10): <http://pic.tv/harvest/video/harvest-of-dignity/>

Farmworkers face hazardous conditions and high risk of mistreatment on the job. The law does not afford them the protections that other employees have. As the clip shows, employers often use deceptive hiring practices to entice workers. Because of the remote locations of many camps, once workers have arrived, they have little or no access to transportation outside of the camp. The dilapidated state of camp housing causes many health problems for North Carolina's farmworkers. Overcrowded trailers, barracks for more than 50 workers without mattresses or air conditioning, leaking roofs and damaged windows, and inadequate or nonoperational toilets and showers are common. Their sub-poverty wages are paid by the piece, according to how much they can harvest, and so they regularly work 12-hour days, with the cost of supplies and tools deducted from their pay. And they are not subject to laws regarding overtime or worker's compensation insurance. They have no health insurance coverage, but they must pay for treatment for their own workplace injuries. They have no holidays, vacation or paid sick leave, so they often keep working impaired instead of treating injuries or illness, even those caused by workplace conditions. Farmworkers report that many employers steal or defraud them of their wages on a regular basis.

The national average earnings for a fieldworker family is \$16,000 (for an individual, \$11,000), but East Coast farmworkers make a full 35 percent less than this, despite the fact that their work is vitally important for North Carolina's economy. With such low earnings, children frequently accompany their parents to work in the fields and increase the family's income, but they not only fall behind in school then, but are exposed to the same environmental risks. The long hours that workers spend in the fields without breaks leads to frequent incidents of heatstroke and heat exhaustion, without access to medical treatment. They also face more health problems due to their lack of protection from pesticides and prolonged nicotine exposure from handling uncured tobacco.²

Even though such workers supply vegetables for our meals each day – tomatoes, sweet potatoes, onions, etc. – these farmworkers are invisible to most of us. And that compounds the economic injustice with spiritual hazard. Melinda Wiggins, director of Student Action with Farmworkers, describes the danger of turning a blind eye toward and isolating ourselves from North Carolina's farm workers: "The effect on the 'native' North Carolina community can be one of spiritual death, as lack of communion with those who are oppressed can leave one with no hope. The segregation of peoples is a symptom that the community as a whole is not well."³ Blinding social distance between mainstream North Carolina society and North Carolina farmworkers is a symptom of grave spiritual danger. The apostle James warned about this distance in his community: "Listen! Hear the cries of the wages of your field hands. These are the wages you stole from those who harvested your fields. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of heavenly forces." (James 5:4, CEB).

God's Testimony: Seeing Workers in Gospel Perspective

The Parable of the Vineyard Workers, or the Generous Landlord, in Matthew 20:1-16 provides an important perspective for Christian communities struggling to understand more faithfully the current situation of the agricultural laborer. This story describes a vineyard owner whose harvest-time has come, and who goes to the town square several times during the course of a day to hire more day-laborers to work in his fields, even up to the end of the afternoon. When evening comes, even though some worked only a part of the day, all the laborers are paid the full day's wage that the owner promised the first workers in the morning. Christians have long understood the theme of this story, rightly, as the generous grace of God (the vineyard owner) toward all people regardless of merit, such that all who

enter his vineyard receive reward whether or not they deserve it. And though it is a story about God, it also has ethical and economic implications for our treatment of workers.

First, God (the vineyard owner) is the source and proprietor of all creation's goods, and all human creatures are workers in God's service. Therefore, it is a mistake to read the owner's remark at the end of the story—"Don't I have the right to do what I want with what belongs to me?"— as an endorsement of the absolute right of *human* ownership, and of employers to pay however much or little they please. The mistake in such a reading is the all-to-common tendency we have to elevate ourselves to the divine "me" in this story, and put ourselves and our property rights in the place of God. If God is the proprietor of creation, then each of us is only a steward of what we have, accountable to God and God's direction for use of our property. All of us are in the fields together as laborers.

This is the second economic implication of the story: human equity and dignity. In God's perspective, merit and demand as evaluated on the market are not sufficient measures for distributing good. As Americans, we tend to assume that the market in general will attribute a dollar value to one's skill, time and effort in work according to the work's productive desirability, and that will constitute a fair and just wage. Some markets provide good information about what is sufficient and fair labor compensation (for traditional tradespersons, such as plumbers or electricians), but others are distorted toward devaluing the status of workers (such as childcare workers, or agricultural fieldworkers). In God's judgment, according to God's standard of goodness, providing enough (in this story, the denarius, or a full day's wage) to each is appropriate equity, in recognition of their *need*, not just their business value as an input to the harvest's profit. The reason for a minimum wage and other worker protections is a recognition that basic human need must be recognized and addressed for everyone in society, and that, unless regulated in this way, the market will not evaluate that human dignity equitably.

The last workers hired at the end of the day, who worked the briefest time, are characterized by too many preachers as missing the earlier employment because they were lazy or intoxicated and slow to get to the labor pool. But Jesus just says they were standing around and no one had hired them. Maybe they'd been there all day, but were just the oldest, slowest, or least experienced harvesters (the most undervalued by the market). Maybe they'd been working their own small field plots, and after a full day working at that were just now going out to earn a little more for their families from a large estate-owner (a realistic scenario in Jesus' Galilee). Whether industrious or not, the market had not recognized their basic human value in coming to the labor pool, nor the significance of their need as a basis for their reward. But God does. And even in the midst of competitive compensation in the market, and clumsy calculations by government bodies, we as God's servants and children can also recognize a measure of equity in our common human dignity by supporting and maintaining minimum standards of wages and job safety protections that address basic needs.

The third ethical insight to be found in the story concerns the role of rivalrous desire as a spiritual force with an economic manifestation. When the workers who had spent all day laboring in the vineyard saw that the owner had paid the last workers with fewest hours the same that they received, they grumbled that they should receive more. The vineyard owner asks them, "Didn't I pay you the day's wage that I promised? Accept what belongs to you and go. I want to give the same wage to this last one as to you. May I not do what I want with what is mine? Or is your eye evil, because I am good?" The phrase "evil eye" that Jesus uses means to see others with stinginess, with envy or jealousy, a desire to have more than others. The divine vineyard owner does not express interest in arguing over whether extra work or extra responsibility deserves extra reward. He probes instead into whether the grumbling worker's complaint comes from eyes blinded by the evil of rivalrous desire, which seeks to have a better wage and be in a better class than one's neighbor. He probes whether that desire has

blinded the worker to the good that the owner has done in generously supplying the need of the late workers rather than affording them only the little they could expect on the market for their labor.

Jesus shows in this story God's valuation of what is good. It is a valuation of people that exceeds that of the market. If we cannot see and practice that valuation of our neighbors the way that God does, the parable implies that it is not God's justice over which we stumble, but our own blindness of selfish ambition and insecurity. Economically, this blindness might prioritize greater profits and higher pay-outs for some at the expense of living wages for those whom the market values least, such as immigrant fieldworkers without good education or English language proficiency. But in light of God's measure of goodness, and by seeing need with the eyes of grace, we also can see value and dignity in each worker beyond the market's measure. As Proverbs 29:7 instructs us, "The righteous one knows the rights of the poor; but the wicked one does not understand such knowledge." And so Jesus concludes the parable with his own comment, that under God's rule, those who rank last will be first, and those who rank first (at least in the myopic eyes of market competition) will be last.

God's perspective on what is good for the laborers shows an important aspect about the Kingdom of God: it is a Kingdom of abundance. One of the key tenets of our market economy is that there is a scarcity of resources. It holds that because there is a finite amount of resources and rewards available, everyone in society will not be able to have their desires met. Unfortunately, this is often used to justify social structures that keep people in poverty. But the Vineyard Owner does not hoard his capital, or pay the market's minimum in the interest of financial security. Where an agribusiness corporation may prioritize a few extra dollars of profit over contracts that pay growers more for protection of fieldworkers, what is most important to the Vineyard Owner is that all the workers have enough. The vineyard is not just a factory in which the laborers fit like levers in a machine, nor are the workers represented as just another cost line on a corporate balance sheet. They are his neighbors, and the vineyard is fruitful with enough abundance for the community.

Jesus' parable portrays the indiscriminate grace of God in welcoming all people who are undervalued and marginalized to the fullness of the heavenly kingdom, but we should not spiritualize away the social, ethical implications of the story. The workers who came early in the morning insisted on their conception of justice, a justice based on scarcity and competitive rivalry. The Vineyard Owner has an entirely different understanding of economic justice -- not as a principle of market-defined desert, but the sort of justice that eliminates unfulfilled needs and sees the goodness of an inestimably valuable human dignity. God sees no worker as more marginal than others or less worthy of economic protection. Jesus offers this parable as an invitation to reorient how we think about economic justice and to witness to the purposes of God's Kingdom.

Our Witness: Building Solidarity with Farmworkers

An important step toward alleviating the suffering of farmworkers, and practicing economic relations that more closely reflect God's economy of abundance, is the passing of legislation that recognizes the dignity of farmworkers and the importance of their work. There must be systemic protections in place based on the economy of abundance that the landowner in Jesus' parable enacted. Farmworkers need us to advocate for laws to extend the same protections to them that many other occupations have, if we believe their lives are as valuable as other human lives. The government should update its housing regulations; provide better, more meaningful health protections; require safety information to be available in Spanish; enforce wage protections; and establish a livable wage for farmworkers. Moreover, it is not enough for us to depend on farm contractors to treat their employees fairly. The government must provide regulatory oversight and enforcement to ensure the safety and fair

treatment of farmworkers. Workers who put their bodies on the line to put food on our tables and in our refrigerators deserve our solidarity and advocacy.

For a problem as entrenched as this one, however, new legislative protections are not enough. In light of God's gracious valuation of all people, our congregations should join with those worker organizations already involved in supporting farmworkers in North Carolina. America has a long history of cultivating change through community action, and congregations are at the center of this history. Churches have been in this struggle for decades. Several church denominations and the National Council of Churches supported the United Farm Workers campaigns for union, wage and safety rights in the 1960s and '70s, launched in California by Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta.

From 1978 to 1986, the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC), another farmworker union founded by Baldemar Velazquez in Ohio, led a strike and boycott campaign against the Campbell Soup Company to get a guaranteed minimum wage for fieldworkers, an end to pesticide spraying while workers were in the fields, toilets accessible at worksites, and outdoor plumbing at the shacks in which they lived. Campbell Soup objected that they didn't hire the workers, the farm owners (or growers) that Campbell bought from did. But in this "crop contracting" system, the corporate food processors (like Campbell) dictate terms in annual contracts with growers, and exercise a "controlling voice" in the market and in the pay and work conditions of farmworkers. The National Council of Churches and Roman Catholic bishops stepped up to support the campaign. Nuns stood up in Campbell stockholder meetings and spoke in support of an agreement with FLOC. Churches hosted FLOC marchers in their basements and fellowship halls. Finally, Campbell negotiated an agreement with both the growers and FLOC that raised farmworker wages, improved living conditions, provided health insurance, made the fields safer, and recognized the right of FLOC members to negotiate in contracts in the future.

The Mt. Olive Pickle Company in the 1990s occupied a similar market position in relationship to cucumber growers in North Carolina that Campbell did in the Midwest with tomato and vegetable growers, and was one of the nation's largest independent pickle processors. FLOC spent years organizing cucumber pickers and pickle processing workers in NC, but made little progress with Mt. Olive in seeking the same kind of three-way contract as they'd obtained from Campbell. So from 1998 to 2004, FLOC led a boycott of the Mt. Olive Pickle Co. in which churches in North Carolina and throughout the U.S. participated. Church members boycotted Mt. Olive Pickle products and publicized that at stores, in petitions and resolutions. FLOC won a collective agreement with Mt. Olive and the growers in 2004 that raised worker wages 10%, recognized their union representation by FLOC, provided grievance procedures and bereavement leave, and subsidized workers' compensation for workers. FLOC also won a lawsuit that forced the return of stolen wages that had been illegally deducted from workers' pay.

Now FLOC is in the midst of a similar campaign on behalf of tobacco fieldworkers to negotiate an agreement with RJ Reynolds, one of the most profitable tobacco companies in the world. Like Campbell and Mt. Olive Pickle, RJ Reynolds can well afford the increased payments to growers to provide farmworkers with fairer wages, housing, and worksite safety. FLOC still needs allies in faith communities to help transport workers, support their field organizers, and petition Reynolds to negotiate. As farmworkers fight for equity and justice, they need to know that our congregations support them and they are not forgotten. We can persevere to truly *see* and *hear* them, even though much of our country does not. We have been shown that though they rank last in pay, safety, and visibility in our country, in the vineyard that God is growing, they rank first.

Discussion

1. What is your reaction to the working conditions and daily lives of farm workers and their families in North Carolina? Do you think that such conditions are the necessary price of cheap produce, or should something to be done to change them?
2. Would your answer change if you found out that many of these workers are undocumented immigrants?
3. As consumers, we exercise a role in creating a demand for low price goods and services. How do you think your consuming habits can exert a positive influence on the lives of farmworkers?
4. What is your reaction to the parable of the Generous Landlord? What other theological resources does this parable provide for thinking about how our food is produced, harvested, and brought to us? What other Scripture passages do you connect with this issue?
5. What concrete action do you think should be taken by the church and by society? How does the good news of God reconciling all things in Christ inform your response, and how can it hone and direct that response?

Notes

¹ Chris Liu-Beers, “Facts About North Carolina Farmworkers,” (*North Carolina Council of Churches* online, available at <http://www.ncchurches.org/2012/10/facts-about-north-carolina-farmworkers-2/>), accessed July 1, 2014.

² Chris Liu-Beers, “NC Farmworker Health Facts,” (*North Carolina Council of Churches* online, available at <http://www.ncchurches.org/2012/10/nc-farmworker-health-facts/>), accessed July 1, 2014.

³ Melinda Wiggins, “Pastoral Reflection on Psalm 126,” *Justice for Farmworkers* (*North Carolina Council of Churches* online, 2014), online at <http://www.ncchurches.org/lectionary/year-b/justice-for-farmworkers-thanksgiving/>.

Unit 3: INEQUALITY AND FAIR BALANCE

Opening Prayer

Lord God, in your steadfast love and truth have met, and righteousness and peace have kissed. Your presence among us is a reminder that injustice will not continue forever. Your incarnation is the promise to overcome that all that threatens to stifle life and peace. Would that you hear the call of your people, and rain down justice and mercy upon this earth. Free those who are oppressed by inequity, and also set free those who oppress as well. Bring all of your human children into a family of peace, wholeness, and renewal, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Scripture

Oppressing the poor in order to enrich oneself, and giving to the rich, will lead only to loss.

Proverbs 22:16

Doom to those who pronounce wicked decrees, and keep writing harmful laws to deprive the needy of their rights and to rob the poor among my people of justice; to make widows their loot; to steal from orphans! What will you do on the day of punishment when disaster comes from far away? To whom will you flee for help; where will you stash your wealth? How will you avoid crouching among the prisoners and falling among the slain? Even so, God's anger hasn't turned away; God's hand is still extended.

Isaiah 10:1-4 CEB

You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Although he was rich, he became poor for our sakes, so that you could become rich through his poverty. I'm giving you my opinion about this. It's to your advantage to do this, since you not only started to do it last year but you wanted to do it too. Now finish the job as well so that you finish it with as much enthusiasm as you started, given what you can afford. A gift is appreciated because of what a person can afford, not because of what that person can't afford, if it's apparent that it's done willingly. It isn't that we want others to have financial ease and you financial difficulties, but it's a matter of equality. At the present moment, your surplus can fill their deficit so that in the future their surplus can fill your deficit. In this way there is equality. As it is written, "The one who gathered more didn't have too much, and the one who gathered less didn't have too little."

2 Corinthians 8:9-15 CEB

Walmart stores are everywhere, and many of us shop there at least occasionally. Few companies have achieved the success Walmart realized from the combination of business planning and financial investment. With approximately 1.3 million employees in the United States, 1 million of who work in hourly retail, Walmart is the nation's largest private employer.¹ In 2013, Walmart made just under \$470 billion, with a \$17 billion profit. Walmart executives reap the benefits of Walmart's success: total executive compensation in 2013 was over \$77 million, and former CEO Michael Duke (2009-2013) received almost \$20.7 million.² Walmart is a powerful and important example of the American dream, born from the vision of a farmer's son from Kingfisher, Oklahoma, Sam Walton.³

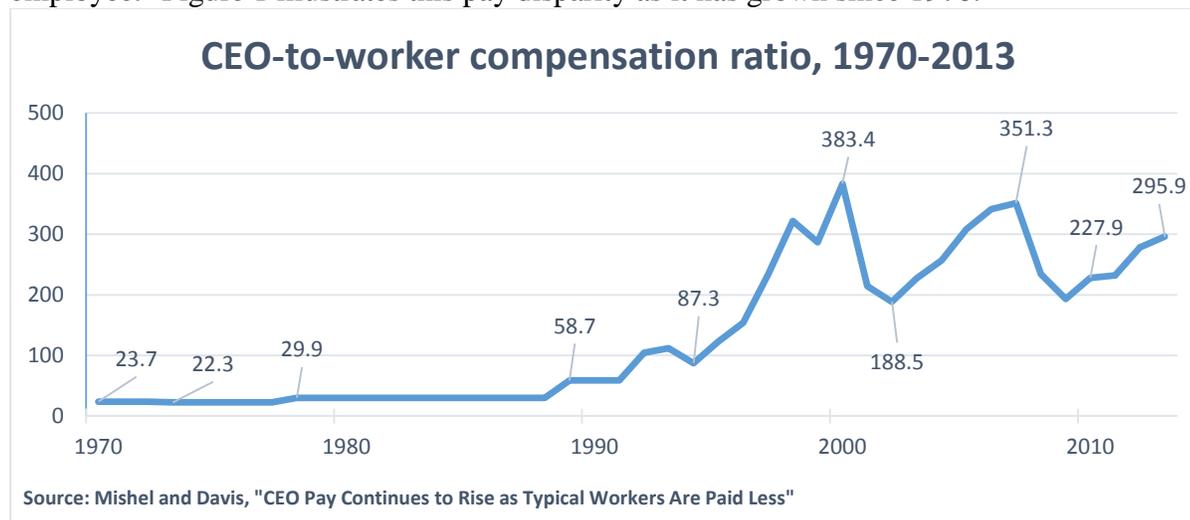
Our Context: Profit for a Few, Struggles for Many

In recent years, economists have scrutinized Walmart for the massive disparity between its low pay for hourly retail employees—the bulk of its American workforce—and its high compensation for executives and the profits garnered by its major stockholders. While it is difficult to get accurate numbers as to what the average hourly retail employee makes (some estimates place it between \$8 and \$10 an hour), over half of this group make less than \$25,000 a year.⁴ This means that these employees

either sit below the federal poverty threshold, or are just above it. As you will recall from our first session, this threshold is inadequate for accounting for the true cost of living. When we use the Living Income Standard (LIS) to measure the adequacy of these wages it becomes clear how insufficient they are. It will come as no surprise to learn that a recent study estimated that this class of low-paid workers require \$6.2 billion a year in federal poverty assistance just to get by.⁵

What does this look like for particular people? During the 2013 holiday season, a Walmart store in Canton, Ohio, noticed it had a problem. Many of its employees were expressing concerns that they would not have enough money to purchase what was necessary to have a Thanksgiving dinner with their families. Other employees responded by putting on a food drive in order to collect donated items for their fellows who would otherwise go without.⁶ While this is a wonderful expression of charity on the part of the employees at that store, it is also highlights the deeper problem. Many Walmart employees simply are not paid enough to get by.

Meanwhile, a select few executives and shareholders receive incredible benefits from the hard work of their employees. It would be a mistake to think that this is a problem only with Walmart. In 2013, American CEOs were compensated relative to their workers at an average ratio of 296:1, ten times the difference of 29:1 in the late 1970s.⁷ But at Walmart the comparison is even more startling: in 2013 the CEO was compensated at a ratio of 1034:1 compared to the average full-time hourly store employee.⁸ Figure 1 illustrates this pay disparity as it has grown since 1970.



Both these figures are an expression of an increasingly serious problem in our economic system. It is widely accepted that the best thing for Americans and our economy is to allow corporations to maximize their profits, and highly-compensated executives are now assumed to be an indispensable means toward that. This assumption is popular, and seems to undergird a dream for widely accessible success in American society, but the reality is that such an approach brings great wealth only to a select few. The real practice of this also assumes that getting the most value from the most workers means paying workers as little as possible. Instead of producing prosperity for all, this widespread practice has resulted in the creation of a permanent class of low-wage workers who must rely on federal assistance and work multiple jobs simply to feed their families.

The present state of affairs at Walmart is no accident. Until 2011, Walmart was an important member of the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC). ALEC is a "private-public" policy institute that allows major corporations like Walmart to sit down with participating state and federal lawmakers and have a direct say in crafting legislation. Corporations pay thousands of dollars to join, but in turn are given power to coauthor bills with lawmakers and veto any produced legislation that they do not like. These bills are then introduced into respective state legislative sessions and heavily lobbied for by ALEC affiliated corporations.⁹ The legislation that ALEC has produced has been disguised as

protecting individual freedom, limiting government intrusion, and safeguarding the future of America's economic superiority. However, given the intimate association of corporate interests and government lawmakers in ALEC, it should come as no surprise that the bills ALEC has produced have only sought to deregulate corporations, reduce worker protections, and make it more difficult to keep those with economic and political means accountable.¹⁰ Its legislation serves to allow corporations, executives, and shareholders to become wealthier at the expense of workers. Even though Walmart left ALEC in 2011 amid heavy criticism about its low-wages, it has been heavily involved in lobbying and supporting candidates who will serve the interest of big business.¹¹

God's Testimony: Fair Balance and Enough for All

Some American Christians would look at this situation and explain that the burden of responsibility is on individual workers to secure for themselves better employment, training, skills, and opportunities. America, they say, is a nation whose economic system and laws provide equal freedom and upward mobility to all groups of people. However, such a reply says less about the content of Christian belief and Scripture and more about the extent to which hyper-individualized Western assumptions have infiltrated the American Christian's imagination. So powerful is the influence of such individualized thought that many American Christians have few resources for thinking with faithful imagination about matters of economic justice such as those we have been describing.¹² Often times, such issues are simply dismissed in favor of "more spiritual" concerns that fit better America's dominant, privatized religious mindset.

However, Proverbs 22:16 (Oppressing the poor in order to enrich oneself, and giving to the rich, will only lead to loss." [NRSV]) allows for no such dismissal: "Oppressing the poor in order to enrich oneself, and giving to the rich, will lead only to loss." Here the burden of responsibility for protecting the impoverished is placed squarely upon those who employ them. Rather than condemning the poor for failing to seize opportunities, the verse prophetically describes the fate promised by God to those who would use the poor to their own ends and share the benefits of their exploitation with others of wealth and power. Walmart's executives have consistently pursued practices that bring them and their shareholders millions of dollars while explaining that raising their rate of pay for hourly employees will cause the loss of jobs and drive down their stock prices. By this logic, if Walmart is going to remain a viable company, then it must have a permanent class of impoverished workers as its backbone. It is this sort of willful exploitation that Proverbs 22:16 condemns. Not only are Walmart's practices bad for its employees, but they are also bad for the company and the economy. Jack Temple, a policy analyst, writes about those companies that have chosen to raise wages for its front-line workers: "It's not news that businesses that pay competitive wages enjoy greater productivity, attract more qualified candidates, and retain more of their workers, with better overall performance over time. Trader Joe's, which pays its employees a starting salary of \$40,000 - \$60,000 per year, has a sales revenue per square foot three times higher than the average U.S. supermarket."¹³ What is more, according to another analyst, Stephen Gandel, Walmart could significantly raise employee compensation rates without affecting its stock prices.¹⁴

We must read Isaiah 10:1-4 against this backdrop. It is an unflinching prophetic description of the demands of God's justice. In this passage, we hear that God's hand is against those who would institute policies that exploit the poor and keep them in a state of lack. There is nothing but the fiercest judgment for those who willingly keep a class of people impoverished so that they might gain wealth. This seems to be exactly the dynamic we see at work in our political and economic system. People and corporations with great financial means have worked to craft a version of our systems of laws, finance and labor that will ensure they remain wealthy at the expense of the poor. The words of Isaiah 10 are a grave reminder that there is accountability to God for our economic treatment of the most vulnerable and that destructive consequences may follow in our history as a society and our collective spiritual life.

Indeed, we are already seeing the ramifications of corporate-influenced economic policy. Wage growth for low- and moderate-income Americans has remained almost stagnant for the last fifteen years, income inequality has grown, the middle class has shrunk, and social mobility is becoming impossible for many Americans. Meanwhile, since 1979, the top 1% of wage earners in our country have received 53.9% of the total increase of income.¹⁵

Our Witness: Restraining the Power of Money, Building the Power of Solidarity

The cautionary warnings of Isaiah and Proverbs are not the final word. Second Corinthians 8:9-15 provides us with a constructive picture of what we Christians can do. This passage is part of a larger section in which Paul is encouraging the Corinthians to give generously to support the ministry of the apostles. He inverts our expectations by recalling that Jesus, “although he was rich became poor for our sakes, so that you could become rich.” (2 Cor 8:9b) As Paul understands the economic implications of Christ’s ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:11-21), there is not room for the belief that one has the right to have as much as possible, even if it is at the expense of others. Instead, we learn from Christ’s revelation of the Father, that God’s economy seeks equality and prosperity for all.

Here there is not condemnation, but rather an invitation into the ways and life of God. It is a life that rejects the thesis that some must go without because it is just the way the world works. Instead, it creates a world where all prosper and have abundant life. Contrary to the public relations campaigns of major corporations and their political allies, both of which have a vested interest in keeping as much wealth for themselves as possible, when Christ becomes poor it does not result in poverty and lack, but in thanksgiving, faith, abundance, and the freedom of enough for all. (see, 2 Cor 1:3-7; 9:10-15) Because the Corinthians have much, just as Christ did, they can give in abundance. And because they are giving in accordance with the One who “supplies seed for planting and bread for eating,” (2 Cor 9:10), they can trust that their giving will not result in a lack.

Paul explains the importance of his exhortation referring to Exodus 16:18: “The one who gathered more did not have too much, and the one who gathered less didn’t have too little.” Paul pulls this verse from the story of God’s provision of manna for the Israelites during their forty years in the wilderness. The context of this verse tellingly makes sense of Paul’s point. It asserts that Sabbath is possible because of God’s promised abundance in providing for the Israelites. When the freed slaves in the wilderness cried out in hunger, God provided bread and quails from the skies each day to gather for their sustenance. Celebrating Sabbath by resting from working and accumulating manna each week is part and parcel of the practice of this community, in which under God’s instruction, all had as much as they needed. In God’s economy, under his Sabbath instruction, the abundance supplied to the community provides enough for all, with a parity that prevents those with much from accumulating too much, and those with little from suffering with too little. Practicing Sabbath principles among owners and workers, the successful and the struggling, ensures equity and enough for all.

This doesn’t require absolute equality of compensation, as there is still “those with more” and “those with less.” Through differences in pay, the market can provide good information about the value of particular education, training and experience; differences in responsibility and accountability; and the difficulty of success at particular roles. But the manna story to which Paul hearkens shows us that the *needs* we have in common provide a baseline against which these other differences cannot justify excessive accumulation. The “everything” of the Golden Rule includes our business and economic relations: ‘In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.’ (Matthew 7:12) If those of us with material assets and privilege need access to sick leave, health and disability insurance, family leave, educational opportunities, paid vacation and secure retirement, then those are needs in common with those who have little, and those with the least should be supplied for those needs before adding more for “those who had gathered much.” In Paul’s understanding of God’s economy, prosperity is not only for the “meritorious,” and those who have the

right combination of social advantages and opportunities are not the only ones who flourish. Even those our culture labels as “unsuccessful” in terms of wealth do not need to be found wanting.

Crucial to practicing God’s economics is ensuring that our economic system does not favor only those who have much. As we have noted already, increasing the wages of low-income Americans is key to achieving a more equitable, and ultimately healthier, economic society. We can do this by pressuring those corporations most responsible for low wages to increase what they pay to their employees, even if this means that their top executives and main shareholders receive a measure less. We ought also to pressure our lawmakers to increase the minimum wage and continually strengthen protections for workers and those who are the most vulnerable. This is not a resentful impulse to punish a greedy aristocracy. Rather, filled by the renewing power of the Holy Spirit, we respond to the Scriptural vision of God’s abundant economy for all of our neighbors, with faith that “the God who is calling us is faithful, and God will do it.” (1 Thess 5:24)

Discussion

1. What other resources do Scripture and Christian thought have for thinking about the vast income inequality that has developed in our nation? How should Christians address the disparity between worker and executive pay?
2. What is your reaction to how corporations have influenced economic policy to their own ends? Can we consider what they are doing good business practice if their workers are struggling to survive?
3. Read Ephesians 6:12. How have the “cosmic powers of this present darkness” become entrenched in our economic policy and practice? What effects do you see that do not dignify human beings?
4. What are the different destructive consequences you can see in society that follow extreme economic inequality? What are foreseeable results in the economy, in our politics, and in our social relationships?

Notes

- ¹ “Corporate and Financial Facts,” Walmart, accessed July 4, 2014, <http://news.walmart.com/walmart-facts/corporate-financial-fact-sheet>; “More Than Half of All of Wal-mart’s Hourly Workers Make Less Than \$25,000,” Susan Berfield, *Bloomberg Businessweek* online, last modified October 23, 2013, accessed July 3, 2014, <http://www.businessweek.com/articles/2013-10-23/more-than-half-of-walmarts-hourly-workers-make-less-than-25-000>
- ² “Annual Financials for Wal-Mart Stores, Inc.” *Market Watch by The Wall Street Journal Online*, accessed July 3, 2014, <http://www.marketwatch.com/investing/stock/wmt/financials/>; “Wal-Mart Stores, Inc.” *Morningstar*, accessed July 4, 2014, <http://investors.morningstar.com/ownership/shareholders-overview.html?t=WMT®ion=usa&culture=en-US&ownerCountry=USA>
- ³ “Sam Walton,” *Walmart Corporate* online, accessed July 3, 2014, <http://corporate.walmart.com/our-story/history/sam-walton>.
- ⁴ “Half of Walmart’s Hourly Employees,” Berfield, *Bloomberg Businessweek*
- ⁵ Americans for tax Fairness, “Walmart on Tax Day: How Taxpayer’s Subsidize America’s Biggest Employer and Richest Family,” April, 2014, accessed July 4, 2014, <http://www.americansfortaxfairness.org/files/Walmart-on-Tax-Day-Americans-for-Tax-Fairness-1.pdf>.
- ⁶ Olivia Perkins, “Is Walmart’s request of associates to help provide Thanksgiving dinner for co-workers proof of low wages?” *Cleveland.com*, accessed July 4, 2014, http://www.cleveland.com/business/index.ssf/2013/11/is_walmarts_request_of_associa.html
- ⁷ Lawrence Mishel and Alyssa Davis, “CEO Pay Continues to Rise as Typical Workers Are Paid Less,” *Economic Policy Institute* online, June 12, 2014, accessed July 6, 2014, <http://www.epi.org/publication/ceo-pay-continues-to-rise/>.
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- ¹⁰ John Nichols, “ALEC Exposed,” *The Nation.*, July 12, 2011, accessed July 7, 2014, <http://www.thenation.com/article/161978/alec-exposed#>.
- ¹¹ “Distorting Our Democracy,” *The Walmart 1% online*, April 7, 2013, accessed July 7, 2014, http://walmart1percent.org/issues/distorting-our-democracy/#_ftnl
- ¹² Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), Kindle e-book, ch. 4.
- ¹³ Jack Temple, “Raising Wages to Raise Profits,” *The Blog*, *Huffington Post Business*, June 3, 2014, accessed July 7, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jack-temple/ikea-minimum-wage_b_5545341.html.
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Unit 4: JUBILEE AND FAST-FOOD WORKERS

Opening Prayer

Giver of all good gifts, you sent your Son Jesus to us to free us from the chains of sin. In the power of your Holy Spirit, he proclaimed release, healing, freedom, and reconciliation. He made a fool of the Powers of this world by making us one with you through his broken flesh. We are joined to you by the foolishness of your majestic love. Out of this life, we ask that you would strengthen us to fight powers of injustice, greed, and apathy. We cry out for your release from all those powers that enslave our human family and your creation. And even as we cry, we know that your hand has been and is at work. We thank you for your unwavering pursuit of our good. Set all of your children free, we pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Scripture

Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee, and news about him spread throughout the whole countryside. He taught in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. Jesus went to Nazareth, where he had been raised. On the Sabbath he went to the synagogue as he normally did and stood up to read. The synagogue assistant gave him the scroll from the prophet Isaiah. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me. He has sent me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to liberate the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” He rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the synagogue assistant, and sat down. Every eye in the synagogue was fixed on him. He began to explain to them, “Today, this scripture has been fulfilled just as you heard it.”

Luke 4:14-21 CEB

Fast food is a major industry in the United States. Almost everywhere you go, you are likely to see golden arches, red pigtailed, or a jolly colonel hoisted high in the air, inviting you to come inside. The fast food industry brings in many billions of dollars each year and is steadily growing.¹ North Carolina has one of the fastest growing fast food industries, with Raleigh-Durham and Charlotte ranking among the top growth markets for fast food.²

Our Context:

Despite this growth and success, fast food workers face a host of problems. Most prominently, wages for those who work in the fast food industry are among the lowest across economic sectors. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average pay rate for Food Service and Preparation workers is a paltry \$8.74 an hour, which equals \$18,180 a year for a full-time employee.³ Though North Carolina has the second highest concentration of fast food workers, NC workers are paid an average hourly wage that is twenty cents less than the national average, for a total annual income of \$17,800 for full-time employees.⁴ Fast food wages are not low because companies are not able to compensate employees; a recent Dēmos Think Tank study found that fast food CEOs made 1,203 times what their average employees made in 2012.⁵ Because of these low wages, many fast food workers require public assistance. At least 52% of families of fast food workers receive assistance, which is twice the percentage of the American workforce in receipt of government aid as a whole. The cost of this assistance is staggering, with \$7 billion going to fast food families annually. Many of these families live below the federal

poverty threshold, and in the words of a recent UC Berkeley study, “Even full-time hours are not enough . . . the families of more than half of the fast-food workers employed 40 or more hours per week are enrolled in public assistance programs.”⁶ The problems fast food workers face do not end at low wages. Wage theft, when an employer fails to pay for hours worked or to compensate overtime, is a consistent issue, and several lawsuits addressing this are currently open against fast food companies.⁷ Employees also face long and unpredictable hours, which complicates caring for family members and makes it difficult for many to invest in better opportunities. Moreover, fast food is no longer a so-called “starter job” for many. More than one-third of these workers are between the ages of 25 and 54, and more than one-quarter of them are supporting families with children. According to Kate Bronfenbrenner, a labor researcher at Cornell, fast food employment “is where people go when [manufacturing] plants go, when we have layoffs in the public sectors—these [fast food jobs] are where adults go to work.”⁸ The presence of many adults in the fast food industry is a visible consequence of the American economy’s shift from manufacturing to service sector employment.

Willietta Dukes, a North Carolina fast food worker of fifteen years, wrote an op-ed for *The Guardian* in which she describes the realities of working in the fast food industry. She writes:

I've worked at fast-food restaurants in North Carolina for the past 15 years. I've spent more hours at Church's Chicken, McDonald's and now Burger King than I can remember. I work hard – I never miss a shift and always arrive on time . . . I make \$7.85 at Burger King as a guest ambassador and team leader, where I train new employees on restaurant regulations and perform the manager's duties in their absence. Before Burger King, I worked at Church's for 12 years, starting at \$6.30 and ending at just a little more than \$8 an hour . . . My boys, Tramaine and Russell Jr are now 20 and 21 years old. When they were in middle and high school, I had to work two fast-food jobs to make ends meet. Most days, I would put them on the bus at 6:30am before working a 9 to 4 shift at one restaurant, then a 5-close shift at another. If I had a day off, I was at their schools, checking in with their teachers and making sure they were keeping up with their education. I wanted them, when they were grown-up, to not have to work two jobs. My hours, like many of my coworkers, were cut this year, and I now work only 25 to 28 hours each week. I can't afford to pay my bills working part time and making \$7.85, and last month, I lost my house. Now, I go back and forth between staying with Russell Jr and Tramaine. I never imagined my life would be like this at this point. I successfully raised two boys, and now I'm forced to live out of their spare bedrooms.⁹

Ms. Dukes’ story is characteristic of millions of Americans’ experience in fast food. Despite working for a long time in the industry, they have few opportunities for advancement, and find themselves unable to survive. This is not God’s Sabbath economy.

In spite of the hardship that fast food workers are facing, they are not waiting for the world to change. In 2013, the Raise Up campaign gathered fast food workers from across the country to call on major fast food companies to treat their employees with dignity and respect. Since the summer of 2013, the Raise Up campaign and other groups have staged numerous walk-outs and strikes. While many fast food restaurants are

operated as franchises, the campaigns focus has not been to shut them down. Rather, they are seeking to pressure fast food corporations by educating the public and their co-workers about how difficult things are. Their requests are simple: to be treated with dignity as important members of the company, to receive a livable wage and be fairly compensated, and the right to organize and bargain for better pay and work conditions.

It is no secret that labor organization is a contentious issue in our country. Unions have been stereotyped as corrupt, ineffective, and violent in the American imagination. However, little thought is ever given to the role that major media corporations have had in shaping this perception. As Darren Cushman Wood points out in his *Blue Collar Jesus*, organized labor has often been far ahead of other portions of society with regards to social issues, and the vast majority of labor disputes have been dull, non-violent affairs.¹⁰ Moreover, organized labor has had a central role in protecting America's workers. Unions have been the driving force behind now familiar worker protections, such as the forty hour work week, the minimum wage, and child labor protections. Furthermore, unions can have a positive impact on economies. Because they are able to bargain for higher wages for members, they increase members' purchasing power at work in the local economy. This increases demand, which in turn encourages hiring.¹¹ There is an added benefit that unions have: the increase in wages that union members receive drives up the wages of nonunionized workers at almost the same rate as unionized ones. It has become apparent over the last forty years that without unions there is little "felt" incentive in many business sectors to pay more for labor. As union membership in the United States has weakened, incomes for the middle class have either stagnated or declined.¹²

God's Testimony:

The words of Luke 4:14-21 cast a vision of a different reality from what fast food workers have been experiencing. Jesus has just left the desert, and as his first act of ministry, filled with the Holy Spirit, he goes to the synagogue in his home town and addresses the people. News had already spread throughout Galilee that there was something about this Jesus, and those at the synagogue were undoubtedly waiting with rapt attention to hear what Jesus would say as he expounded on the scripture he read, as was customary. Instead, Jesus makes the simple claim, "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled just as you heard it." The passage goes on to describe the Nazarenes' confusion about just what this means and how in the world it could be that this Scripture could be fulfilled just by Jesus' presence.

From our historical distance, it can be hard to understand just what is so confusing about the situation. After all, Jesus describes God's purpose in terms of things we can generally agree on: hope for the poor, healing the sick, and giving liberty to those in chains. But the closing phrase Jesus quotes from Isaiah 61:1-2, about proclaiming "the year of the Lord's favor," refers to a radically equalizing social practice of ancient Israel. Using the phrase from the time of the exile "year of the Lord's favor," Isaiah (and Jesus) are talking about the Year of Jubilee.

Leviticus 25 describes the year of Jubilee as the 50-year consummation of seven cycles of Sabbath years (see Session 1). According to the legislation, every fiftieth year all those who had gone into servitude, whether because of debt or some other reason, were to be released, the population returned to the apportionments of land given to their ancestral tribes, and the land was not worked for produce.¹³ To understand the radical nature of this legislation, we have to understand the nature of ancient Israel's economy. Israel was a predominantly agricultural society. The amount and quality of the land held by a family constituted almost all the wealth

that family members might have and all the assets that they might pass on to the next generation. If landowners were able to purchase a plot of land in addition to the one that belonged to their family, they increased the amount that they could produce. The extra produce brought in more income, and this in turn increased the ability of landowners to purchase more land in the future. Over the course of generations, it is not hard to see how this normal economic cycle would lead to the concentration of land and resources (and the ability to gain more land and resources) in the hands of an increasingly small number of people. This dynamic would allow the creation of a landed aristocracy to whom the majority of the rest of the Israelite population would be indebted. Anyone who has played the board game “Monopoly” knows how this works.

However, it was a basic tenet of Israelite religion that the land was not their own, but a gracious gift from God for the entire covenant people. As Leviticus 25:23-24 states, “The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants. Throughout the land that you hold, you shall provide redemption for it” (NRSV). The belief that the land was God’s was at the heart of Jubilee legislation. As a law, it functioned as a divinely ordained interruption of market inertia that otherwise would consolidate financial and material security in the hands of fewer and fewer people. Moreover, the Israelites were commanded to practice Jubilee once in a generation, because the unregulated forces of the normal functioning of the market excessively advantaged those who already had much. The year of Jubilee was the total concrete realization in the lives of the Israelites of the primordial command to keep Sabbath. God was realistic about how markets work in human life, but showed the people how the power of wealth could be corrected (in Sabbath and Jubilee practices) to restore equity and peace. In the Jubilee, all had parity with enough resources under God’s favor, and all were reminded that God is the one who established their dignity and integrity as beings apart from their ability to produce and sell. As stated previously, these measures in Scripture to protect equality are not intelligible to an economic world based in scarcity. Rather, they can only make sense in an economic world in which God is the one who provides abundance and maintains the dignity of all persons.

We can begin to understand the confusion of Jesus’ Nazarene audience. By the time of Isaiah, Jubilee legislation had come to symbolize a time when God would finally bring the work started with Israel to completion. God would set the world aright in such a way that economic and political forces would no longer oppress those whom they were intended to serve. At the synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus announces that in his incarnation and mission a cosmic Jubilee is taking place. His presence is the beginning of the institution of God’s economic justice based in Sabbath rest and abundance, and concretely dignifies those who work at the margins of society. Christ’s incarnation is a promise that God not only cares about economic justice, but is also working in history to bring it about for the restoration and renewal of creation.

Our Witness:

We would be mistaken to think that all that is left for us to do is to wait for the consummation of Christ’s work. As the Body of Christ, we are joined with him in this mission and in the new creation he is bringing about. The early Church took the economic (along with all the other) implications of Christ’s incarnation, life, death, and resurrection seriously. We read in Acts 2 and 4 that they concretely enacted a kind of Jubilee among themselves, treating their possessions as belonging to all and even going as far as selling what they had and giving it to the apostles, who would then give it to those who were without. In this way, no one had need in their congregations.¹⁴

Regardless of the benefits of any economic system, we have seen that Scripture makes clear that when that system's normal practice results in the impoverishment of a class of people while another class has abundance, the status quo cannot endure. Out of our convictions that God regards each person with value and love, and that God supplies enough to us all together for abundance and rest, we can stand together with fast food workers and call for justice. Our support of those organizations that are campaigning on behalf of fast food workers is a substantive step in this direction. The right to organize and bargain for better pay and working conditions empowers fast food workers to fight for justice. They can call for what Scripture makes clear is due all workers, Sabbath rest and equity. In this way they can once again reclaim the God-given dignity that is lacking in their treatment. The gracious invitation into the life of God that we receive in Christ is an invitation to participate with God in a world with proper orientation to our Creator and our neighbors. It is an invitation to a world of abundance and rest, an economy that God has promised will come, and to which we are summoned to belong and bear witness. We can do that by supporting our neighbors among fast food workers for greater security, organizing to repair the disparities between the very rich and the very poor, and calling our society to account according to the principles of fairness and equality embedded in our faith.

Discussion

1. How does Luke's understanding of Jesus' mission as a cosmic Jubilee help you reevaluate both the situation of fast food workers and labor policy in general?
2. It would be easy to dismiss the difficulties of fast food workers by saying that they should get an education or better jobs. What kind of social advantages have allowed people you know to take better opportunities?
3. Thinking back over this curriculum, how do you think Scripture is calling us to be involved with labor issues?

Notes

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¹⁰ Darren Cushman Wood, *Blue Collar Jesus: How Christianity Supports Workers’ Rights*, (Santa Ana, CA: Seven Locks Press, 2004), 1-5.

¹¹ Eric Liu, “Viewpoint: The Decline of Unions Is Your Problem Too,” *Time Magazine* online, January 29, 2013, accessed July 10, 2014, <http://ideas.time.com/2013/01/29/viewpoint-why-the-decline-of-unions-is-your-problem-too/>.

¹² Lawrence Mishel, “Unions, Inequality, and the Faltering Middle-Class,” *Economic Policy Institute* online, August 29, 2012, accessed July 10, 2014, <http://www.epi.org/publication/ib342-unions-inequality-faltering-middle-class/>. 7

¹³ See Numbers 34-35 and Joshua 13-21 for accounts of the original apportionment of the land.

¹⁴ Acts 4:32-35. For another description of the Early Church’s economic polity, see Acts 6:1-7.

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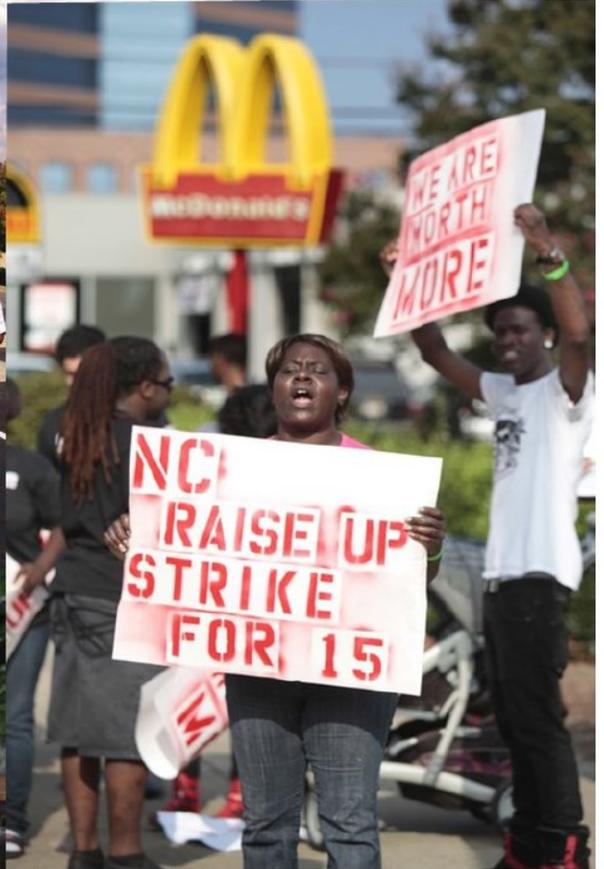
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“We Can’t Survive on \$7.25”: The Fight for 15 and a Union in NC



NC RAISE UP

Who We Are

NC Raise Up (also known as Carolina Workers Organizing Committee) is an organization of fast food workers across North Carolina. We are from every race, nationality and religion, but we are united as workers in demanding that fast food corporations **pay us enough to feed our families**.

On August 29, 2013, thousands of fast food workers in more than 60 U.S. cities **walked off the job** to demand higher pay and respect. We joined this national day of strikes as workers at over 50 stores in **Charlotte, Greensboro, Raleigh and Durham** came together to fight for our future. Workers in all of these cities have formed organizing committees to continue the fight.

The corporations that we work for have **plenty of money to pay us more**. Companies like McDonald's, Taco Bell, Burger King and Popeyes make billions of dollars in profits while we work for poverty wages. Our plan is to keep fighting until every fast food worker in North Carolina earns a living wage of **\$15 an hour**.

What Do We Want?



Find Us Online:



NC Raise Up

facebook.com/pages/NC-Raise-Up



@NCRaiseUp

Email: carolinaworkers@gmail.com

A \$15/Hour Wage

Most of us are working two and three jobs and still can't feed our families. We deserve more, especially when fast food corporations are making record profits. They can afford it!

Freedom to Join a Union

Unions are organizations of workers that use their strength in numbers to fight for better working conditions. We believe that all workers should be able to have unions at their workplaces without facing retaliation from their employers.

Dignity and Respect

Fast food work is one of the most difficult jobs in America. We want to be treated with the respect we deserve.

The High Cost of Low Wages

The Impact of Poverty Wages on Fast Food Workers in NC

All families enrolled in public assistance programs in NC (in thousands)

EITC: 908.9 Medicaid/CHIP: 711.7 Food Stamps: 847.1 TANF: 42.0

Average annual program costs in NC (in millions, 2011)

EITC: \$2071.2 Medicaid/CHIP: \$7924.9 Food Stamps: \$1816.5 TANF: \$82.1

Number of fast food workers in NC who receive public assistance

66,000

Program participation rates for families of fast food workers in NC

EITC:50% Medicaid (adults):17% Medicaid/CHIP (children):20% Food Stamps:27%

Percentage of families of NC fast food workers on any form of public assistance

54%

Cost to NC taxpayers because of low wages in the fast food industry

\$264 million/year

**All data taken from report released by the UC Berkeley Center for Labor Research and Education*



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North Carolina – Fast Food Fact Sheet

- 1) *While Fast Food wages across the US are low, wages in North Carolina are even lower than in the nation as a whole.*

Charts below detail employment figures and wages for “Combined Food Preparation and Serving Workers, Inc. Fast Food” for 2012. North Carolina’s wages average well below the national hourly wage.

Employment estimate and mean wage estimates for this occupation¹

	Employment ²	Employment RSE ³	Mean hourly wage	Mean annual wage ⁴	Wage RSE ⁵
US	2,943,810	0.6 %	\$9.00	\$18,720	0.3 %
NC	124,660	2.1 %	\$8.56	\$17,800	0.5 %

- 2) *North Carolina has among the highest concentrations of fast food jobs in the nation.*

NC is second among US states with the highest concentration of jobs in FF occupations:⁶

State	Employment	Employment/ 1000 jobs	Hrly mean wage	Annual mean wage
Kentucky	56,920	32.25	\$8.25	\$17,160
North Carolina	124,660	32.14	\$8.56	\$17,800
West Virginia	21,640	30.45	\$8.26	\$17,180
Indiana	79,970	28.44	\$8.58	\$17,850
Ohio	143,240	28.34	\$8.94	\$18,600

¹ All data on this page from <http://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes353021.htm>

² Estimates for detailed occupations do not sum to the totals because the totals include occupations not shown separately. Estimates do not include self-employed workers.

³ The relative standard error (RSE) is a measure of the reliability of a survey statistic. The smaller the relative standard error, the more precise the estimate.

⁴ Annual wages have been calculated by multiplying the hourly mean wage by 2080 hours; where an hourly mean wage is not published the annual wage has been directly calculated from the reported survey data. However, many Fast food workers average far less than 2080 hours per year.

⁵ See Note 3

⁶ <http://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes353021.htm>

Within NC, four metropolitan areas had some of the highest FF employment in the US. The top ten metropolitan areas:

Metropolitan areas with the highest concentration of jobs and location quotients in this occupation⁷

Metropolitan area	Employment ⁽¹⁾	Employment/ 1000 jobs	Hourly mean wage	Annual mean wage ⁽²⁾
Hinesville-Fort Stewart, GA	1,040	62.18	\$8.10	\$16,840
Jacksonville, NC	2,360	53.84	\$8.17	\$16,990
Greenville, NC	3,520	47.84	\$8.46	\$17,590
Burlington, NC	2,570	45.89	\$8.36	\$17,400
Valdosta, GA	2,240	44.92	\$8.07	\$16,780
Fayetteville, NC	5,520	43.19	\$8.61	\$17,910
Clarksville, TN-KY	3,440	42.16	\$8.32	\$17,300
Lafayette, IN	3,560	41.20	\$8.41	\$17,480
Wichita Falls, TX	2,240	40.14	\$8.26	\$17,180
Killeen-Temple-Ft Hood, TX	5,050	39.64	\$8.74	\$18,180

3) *The Fast Food industry is growing at a faster pace in North Carolina than in most other states.*

One industry franchising magazine listed the top 15 major markets that would see the largest growth in Fast Food in 2013. Charlotte NC was 3rd on the list, and Raleigh-Durham was 12th.⁸ Only Texas had more markets (3) in the top 15. QSR magazine predicted Charlotte would see 9% growth in Fast food traffic through 2016, with Raleigh-Durham seeing 4.6%.⁹ On separate rankings for Medium and Small markets, Greenville NC came in 3rd among medium markets,¹⁰ and Wilmington NC came in 7th among the small markets.¹¹

⁷ <http://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes353021.htm>. Non-top10 numbers found by mousing over relevant map area.

⁸ <http://www.qsrmagazine.com/content/2013-growth-40-large>

⁹ <http://www.qsrmagazine.com/content/2013-growth-40-large>

¹⁰ <http://www.qsrmagazine.com/content/2013-growth-40-medium>

¹¹ <http://www.qsrmagazine.com/content/2013-growth-40-small>

FAST FOOD WORKER SPOTLIGHTS

Tenesha Hueston: Shift manager at Burger King in Durham. She has been in the fast food industry for 16 years and currently makes less than \$8 an hour. Tenesha joined the strike line in late August and has been an active leader with NC Raise Up ever since.



"I am a manager at Burger King, responsible for a crew of 8-12 people, we do our best to provide excellent service. During my shift I'll be on my feet nonstop between 8 and 14 hours. Yet I only get paid \$7.75 an hour.

I am a single mother of three, barely making it week by week, even though I'm a full time employee.

Just to be able to afford putting food on my table I am forced to use food stamps because my pay is so low.

Companies like Burger King are making millions each year, it's ridiculous that as a full time worker with years of experience I am forced to rely on public assistance just to barely survive.

We deserve better.

We demand a livable wage, enough money to survive without having to depend on government assistance.

We are going to keep fighting until we get it. "

Jeanette Lynn: McDonald's worker in Durham, is a mother of three trying to make a living on \$7.25 per hour. She has been working for two years without a raise.



"I've been at McDonalds for 2 years without a single raise.

In order to feed my family I'm forced to use food stamps just to get by.

We deserve a raise and that's why I'm a part of this movement because we can't survive on \$7.25, we need a change."

THURSDAY, AUG 29, 2013 07:44 AM EDT

Largest fast food strike ever today: 58 cities will be affected

Work stoppage will hit about a thousand shops and several cities in the south today, as workers seek fair wages

BY JOSH EIDELSON



Demonstrators supporting fast food workers protest outside a McDonald's, July 29, 2013, in New York's Union Square. (Credit: AP/John Minchillo)

Fast food workers today plan to mount one-day walkouts against nearly a thousand stores in over fifty cities — the largest-ever mobilization against their growing, low-wage, non-union industry, which until last fall had never faced a substantial U.S. strike. The work stoppage comes four weeks after a four-day, seven-city [strike wave](#) in which organizers say thousands walked off the job.

Today, the strikes — which [started](#) with a single-city November work stoppage in New York — are expected to hit several cities. In each city — from Los Angeles to Peoria — workers are demanding a raise to \$15 an hour, and the chance to form a union without intimidation by their boss.

“I’m not a kid,” Raleigh, North Carolina, Little Caesar’s worker Julio Wilson told Salon. Rather, he said, “I am a single father, I have a daughter with special needs that needs attending to on a daily basis.” He said many of his co-workers and their families “need to be compensated to be able to live.”

Wilson, 34, first learned about the campaign when he saw a striking New York workers on TV. “They kind of sparked my interest,” he said, and led him to search online for a local organization tied to the cause. Over the past eight years, he’s worked at Burger King, Subway, Arby’s and McDonald’s. “I’ve made my way through the fast food circuit,” said Wilson, “and they’re all the same.”

Asked about the coming strike, McDonald's e-mailed, "The story promoted by the individuals organizing these events does not provide an accurate picture of what it means to work at McDonald's." The company said it "aims to offer competitive pay and benefits to our employees" and that "Our history is full of examples of individuals who worked their first job with McDonald's and went on to successful careers both within and outside of McDonald's." A recent [study](#) by the pro-labor National Employment Law Project found that "only 2.2 percent of jobs in the fast food industry are managerial, professional, or technical occupations," and that the average pay for a front-line fast food worker is \$8.94 per hour.

As Salon [has reported](#), the key player behind the campaign is the Service Employees International Union, which has partnered with local faith, labor and community groups in an effort to transform an industry whose conditions [increasingly characterize](#) U.S. work. Like a growing number of U.S. workers, fast food employees make poverty wages, face erratic schedules and unstable employment and are paid to [perform](#) a friendly personality ("emotional labor") while working at a pace some blame for on-the-job burns.

Like their counterparts [cleaning](#) corporate offices or [hauling goods](#) in Walmart warehouses, they face a "Who's the Boss" problem that renders New Deal labor law less and less relevant: The companies that legally employ them (individual fast food restaurant franchisees, who may own a handful of stores) aren't the ones with the greatest sway over their working conditions. That would be giant corporations like McDonald's, which brought in \$5.5 billion in profit in 2011, and takes about a seventh of franchised stores' revenue in rent and fees.

Big Macs are big business, and an ever-bigger part of our economy. "This is where people go when [manufacturing] plants go, when we have layoffs in the public sectors – these are where adults go to work," said Kate Bronfenbrenner, who directs labor education and research at Cornell. Indeed, the [top three](#) occupations measured by the Bureau of Labor Statistics are all jobs found in fast food or retail (in some cities, retail workers will join today's strikes as well).

But these strikes' significance extends beyond fast food. A [white paper](#) released last week by the Economic Policy Institute found that "the vast majority of U.S. workers – including white-collar and blue-collar workers and those with and without a college degree – have endured more than a decade of wage stagnation." In other words, despite increased productivity and profits, so-called "unskilled" workers aren't the only ones treading water.

"If you go back to the nineteenth century, manufacturing jobs sucked," said John Schmitt, a senior economist at the progressive Center for Economic and Policy Research. Contrary to the myth that lower wages for service work were simply "preordained," argued Schmitt, "the problem over the last thirty or forty years in terms of the economy is the declining bargaining power for workers. And the question is, how do we reconstruct bargaining power for workers?"

That's what the organizers of today's strike are out to do. While workers say they've already achieved some incremental store-specific victories – from scheduling changes, to raises, to the restoration of a tip jar – it's too soon to say if they'll succeed. But they're already drawing near-unparalleled attention from local and national media — and within organized labor. Though identified primarily with SEIU, which isn't in the AFL-CIO, the fast food campaign gets frequent mention in a July report to the AFL-CIO executive council summarizing the pre-convention conversations that federation has been holding across the country.

Among the aspects of the strikers' strategy: an attack on all the companies in the industry, executed in collaboration among a range of progressive groups, including political, media, consumer, and legal angles, all anchored by one-day strikes designed to maximize impact and minimize risk – most of them carried out

by a minority of a store's workforce, with less focus on shutting down business than on embarrassing corporations and engaging co-workers and the larger public.

"At first, I was nervous," said Chicago Subway employee Felix Mendez, who'll be striking for the third time today. Still, he told Salon he took the lead in getting all of his three co-workers to participate in the prior strikes, shutting down their store. "If we just sit back and do nothing about it," he recalled telling them, "we're never going to get what we want." Mendez said he makes \$8.25 an hour after working at Subway for three years. "Before, I wasn't really too serious about anything..." said Mendez. "I have changed a whole lot since I've been part of this union."

"Workers have really taken charge," said Rev. Martin Rafanan, the community director for STL Can't Survive on \$7.35, the St. Louis fast food effort. "They've called for this strike because it's an opportunity to continue to expand their numbers and expand their geography." He expressed hope that today's strike would "make a big splash in terms of folks beginning to see this as a national movement." Rafanan, who co-chairs the workers rights board of the Missouri chapter of the labor-community group Jobs with Justice, said last week that about 200 St. Louis fast food workers were involved in organizing towards the strike. He told Salon that, beyond the sites where workers and others have been furiously organizing in recent weeks, "there's a good chance" of workers in other stores or cities walking off the job today without any prior contact with the campaign.

Where will it all lead? A source present at a meeting SEIU held earlier this month with allies [told](#) Salon that potential strategies under discussion included a campaign for state referenda to allow cities to raise fast food wages, and a push for top burger corporations to jointly agree to eat the cost of increased labor costs. [Asked](#) whether the efforts could end in a deal in which corporations accept union negotiations and the union agrees before formal bargaining to cap new labor costs or carve out certain regions, SEIU strategist Scott Courtney answered, "It could be something like that." SEIU President Mary Kay Henry said, "I think anything you know about traditional collective bargaining is possible, and then things we haven't imagined." Asked about such a scenario, Rafanan said, "I'm for any tactic or strategy at this point which can move us forward, all right? And there are a lot of us, people have been discussing these things, a variety of these things. But where I'm standing, I'm a community ally, so my goal is to stand with workers. I believe that workers should make decisions about how they're going to organize their industry."

As an example of effective collective action, Rafanan related how the campaign had beaten back alleged retaliation against a St. Louis striker earlier this month. According to Rafanan, when workers returned from the work stoppage, a Popeyes manager fired one of them and "was very adamant that the person would not get their job back." In response, activists "blocked the drive-through and had taken over the counter," drawing several police cars. Before the situation escalated to arrests, said Rafanan, the franchisee owner arrived and, after a conversation with a local councilmember on the scene to support the workers, agreed to reinstate the employee. "This is the kind of thing we feel we can do when we don't get a response," said Rafanan.

Cornell's Bronfenbrenner argued that having community allies [escort](#) workers back to work to ward off post-strike retaliation was the campaign's most important innovation, and a testament to the deep community ties the campaign had built. "As long as they can keep the bosses from beating them down by having the eyes of the world always on them, keep the campaign in the sunshine," she said, "they have a chance." Because a national fast food corporation could simply cut off the franchise contract of any local store owner who started bargaining collectively with workers, noted Bronfenbrenner, winning unionization would require

compelling corporations to forswear union-busting. “So it’s either going to be big,” she said, “or it’s not going to happen.”

Sociologist Stanley Aronowitz, who directs the Center for the Study of Culture, Technology and Work at the City University of New York, credited the campaign with “putting tremendous pressure, good pressure, on the fast food chains to raise their wages.” But he expressed concern that SEIU would be too quick to make a deal with corporations restricting future strikes. “They have gotten this far because they have taken direct action, and they have expanded their direct action efforts,” Aronowitz told Salon. “If they decide to settle down prematurely, I think they will duplicate what happened to the United Auto Workers, and what’s happened to the public employees unions, which is basically that they’re put permanently on the defensive.”

Today’s strike comes one day after the [fiftieth anniversary](#) of the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. According to Rev. Rafanan, St. Louis strikers will honor the march, and a subsequent local protest in which civil rights activists chained themselves to the Jefferson Bank, by participating in a civil disobedience training this afternoon. Asked if that means we’ll see more fast food workers mounting civil disobedience, Rafanan said, “Certainly that’s where we’re ramping up to.”

Julio Wilson said the march’s anniversary “ties in perfectly” with the strikes’ spread south. Wilson told Salon the example of Martin Luther King “has inspired me personally to stand up for what I believe in, and that’s exactly what I’m going to do.” Asked how many of his Raleigh store’s twenty employees would join the first-of-its-kind strike, he answered, “Hopefully all of them.”

Why I'm on strike today: I can't support myself on \$7.85 at Burger King

I know what it feels like to be afraid that your children will go to bed hungry, your heat will be turned off or you'll be evicted



Willietta Dukes



Fast food workers take part in a protest at a McDonald's restaurant in Harlem, New York for better wages, 4 April 2013. Photograph: VIEWpress Corp/Corbis

I've worked at fast-food [restaurants](#) in North Carolina for the past 15 years. I've spent more hours at [Church's Chicken](#), [McDonald's](#) and now [Burger King](#) than I can remember. I work hard – I never miss a shift and always arrive on time. But today, I'm going on strike.

I make \$7.85 at [Burger King](#) as a guest ambassador and team leader, where I train new employees on restaurant regulations and perform the manager's duties in their absence. Before Burger King, I worked at Church's for 12 years, starting at \$6.30 and ending at just a little more than \$8 an hour.

I've never walked off a job before. I don't consider myself an activist, and I've never been involved with politics. I'm a mother with two sons, and like any mom knows, raising two teenage boys is tough. Raising them as a single mother, on less than \$8 an hour, is nearly impossible, though.

My boys, Tramaine and Russell Jr are now 20 and 21 years old. When they were in middle and high school, I had to work two fast-food jobs to make ends meet. Most days, I would put them on the bus at 6:30am before working a 9 to 4 shift at one restaurant, then a 5-close shift at another. If I had a day off, I was at their schools, checking in with their teachers and making sure they were keeping up with their education. I wanted them, when they were grown-up, to not have to work two jobs.

My hours, like many of my coworkers, were cut this year, and I now work only 25 to 28 hours each week. I can't afford to pay my bills working part time and making \$7.85, and last month, I lost my house. Now, I go back and forth between staying with Russell Jr and Tramaine. I never imagined my life would be like this at this point. I successfully raised two boys, and now I'm forced to live out of their spare bedrooms. That's why I'm on strike today.

About a month and a half ago, I saw a Facebook page for NC Raise UP, which encouraged fast-food workers in North Carolina to join with others around the country who are striking. Today, [I am joining workers](#) in 40 cities who are taking collective action for a \$15 wage and the right to form a union without retaliation. Most of the workers I've met on social media are just like me – mothers and fathers who wonder if they will ever get what they deserve, if they'll ever escape from poverty. We are walking off our jobs because we don't know how we are going to survive on these jobs. We're on strike because we can't afford not to strike.

Burger King says they can't pay employees like me higher wages because it would force them out of business. Yet last year it made \$117m in profits and its CEO took home \$6.47m. It would take me 634 years to earn that much.

I've worked in fast-food for 15 years, and I can't even afford my own rent payments. We just want fairness and to be able to provide for our families. No one who works every day should be forced to be homeless.

As a guest ambassador, my job is to keep customers happy, greeting them at the door, checking in with them at their tables and picking up their trash. I'm good at what I do. Customers have come in and have wanted to give me \$25 gift certificates as a way of saying thank you. If only Burger King rewarded hard work in the same way.

I'm on strike today for the first time in my life, and surprisingly, I don't feel afraid. Like so many fast-food workers across this country, I know what it feels like to be truly afraid – afraid of having your children go to bed hungry, or having your heat turned off in February, or being evicted from your home. Today is not scary. Today is empowering.

Fast-food workers in the Triangle want \$15 an hour

Posted: Nov 06, 2013 10:18 PM EST Updated: Nov 06, 2013 10:35 PM EST

by Eileen Park - [bio](#) | [email](#)

RALEIGH, N.C. -

Fast-food workers in the Triangle continue their movement to rally the state in increasing the minimum wage.

Many of those workers and activists want the new minimum wage to be \$15 an hour and they said it must be done or else taxpayers will continue to pay the cost.

Ashley Echevarria raises her two kids on minimum wage, which is \$7.25 an hour.

"Me and my family can't live off of that," said Echevarria.

She works at a McDonald's in Durham and said her expenses are piling up. "We're on food stamps, and that's not even enough for us."

For Echevarria, who doesn't have a high school degree, she said it's hard to find a different job or else she would've left McDonald's months ago.

She attended a public forum at the N.C. Justice Center Tuesday night, hoping to find a community that wants exactly what she wants - \$15 dollars an hour.

During the forum one activist said, "Fast food companies like McDonald's make billions of dollars a year, yet they force their workers to rely on taxpayers to get by."

Those at the rally want the minimum wage to jump to \$15 an hour and explained it's not a crazy idea.

According to NC Raise Up, more than half of North Carolina's fast-food workers rely on government assistance. That's why they said increasing the minimum wage won't just be helping the workers, but also the taxpayers.

Sen. Earline Parmon said, "As long as they can keep us fearful and not organized, they will continue to treat us like this."

Not everyone agreed that raising the minimum wage is the answer.

David Schawel is an investment manager in Durham and said, "Companies would hire less people to do the same amount of work. After the government increased the minimum wage by 40 percent in 2006, the percent of 16 to 19 year olds that had jobs fell from 42 percent to 28 percent in a few years."

According to NC Raise Up, taxpayers in North Carolina pay \$264 million a year to help subsidize workers who make minimum wage.