

## LABOR DAY: JOB QUALITY = FOOD QUALITY



When did pressing the “start” button on a microwave become synonymous with cooking? Is the package of chemicals and preservatives wrapped around the ingredients and then wrapped in plastic and later plopped on the microwave tray “food?”

An Oregon worker making minimum wage and working full time earns \$17,900 a year. If he or she lives in Medford he or she is classified as below Very Low Income (HUD Guidelines). Should a cafeteria cook whose primary culinary responsibility is pressing the “start” button earn more than the minimum wage?

Half of the jobs in this country pay less than \$27,000 per year. In its 2013 Labor Day Statement, the USCCB writes, “The only way to reduce the widening gap between the affluent and the poorest people in our nation is by creating quality jobs that provide a just compensation that enables workers to live in the dignity appropriate for themselves and their families.”

We must “demand boldness in promoting a just economy that reduces inequality by creating jobs that pay a living wage.”

Job-creating policies that generate jobs to press “start” buttons on the microwave do not create living-wage jobs. Such policies create a downward spiral of minimum wage jobs cooking unhealthy processed food. The worker does not find a living-wage job; does the worker at least find dignity in this work?

Encouraging dignity in work is a Catholic value. “Work is more than a way to make a living; it is a form of continuing participation in God’s creation. Employers contribute to the common good ...by creating jobs that uphold the dignity and rights of workers — to productive work, to decent and just wages...”

Our nation can reverse this downward spiral by generating quality jobs – opportunities for productive, dignified work paying a just wage – creating quality food. In an address to the Center for Disease Control, food writer Michael Pollan offered this advice, “Don’t eat anything with more than five ingredients, or ingredients you can’t pronounce.” That is, eat quality food.

Quality food is built from scratch. It is baked, chopped, pureed, tasted, modified, seasoned and served. Cooking from scratch requires training; cooking well from scratch requires skills. Learning to cook well provides a job skill that is desperately needed in American society.

The Catholic Campaign for Human Development awarded a grant to New City Initiative’s culinary program where participants who have experienced homelessness learn the skills to create quality food that will lead to a quality job.

Thirty years ago, the average household spent 17% of its income on food. Today it spends 11%. Thirty years ago, the average household spent 11% of its income on health-related issues. Today it spends 17%. Food has become less expensive because it is cheaper to manufacture food with lower nutritional value and higher calories.

Food has become less expensive because it costs less to manufacture a microwaveable package of preservatives and chemicals that is cooked by pressing the “start” button on a microwave.

This Labor Day let us “demand boldness in promoting a just economy that reduces inequality by creating jobs that pay a living wage.” This Labor Day let us be bold and advocate for real jobs creating real food. Real jobs that provide dignity and a living wage. Real food that is cooked from scratch.

“At the end of Mass we are commanded “Go and announce the Gospel of the Lord.” We leave with a sense of mission to show one another honor by what we do and say. On this Labor Day our mission takes us to the millions of people who continue to suffer the effects of the current economy.”

[Read the entire USCCB 2013 Labor Day Statement](#)



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