

Labor Day and Wage Theft



As the Liturgy of the Eucharist begins, the priest blesses God for the offering of bread and wine, “which human hands have made (bread) and which is the work of human hands (wine).

Would we question that the laborer behind the bread and or the wine is due

his wage? Of course not, but if we needed guidance we could turn to scripture for help: “You shall not exploit your neighbor. You shall not commit robbery. You shall not withhold overnight the wages of your laborer” (Leviticus: 19:13).

Why is it necessary to pay the laborer before nightfall? Scripture tells us that “On each day you shall pay the servant’s wages before the sun goes down, *since the servant is poor and is counting on them* (emphasis added). Otherwise the servant will cry to the LORD against you, and you will be held guilty” (Deuteronomy 24: 14-15).

Today, the servant (laborer) may cry to the Lord but she or he also needs redress in our state courts for wages withheld, which is wage theft.

Wage theft – stealing wages from workers who have earned them – takes a variety of forms:

- Forcing workers to work off the clock,
- Refusing to pay overtime,
- Shaving hours from time cards,
- Paying less than minimum wage,
- Outright refusing to pay for work performed
- Withholding tips
- Misclassification of Employees as Independent Contractors
- Denial of legally required meal and rest breaks
- Underpayment of wages

[Voz Workers’ Rights Education Project](#) is a worker-led organization that empowers immigrants and day laborers to gain control over their working conditions. One of its finest achievements is its work reducing the amount of unpaid wages by mobilizing day laborers when employers refuse to pay wages. Voz has accomplished this by establishing a Workers’ Center where employers come, hire a day laborer, and fill out paper work. Voz has also reduced unpaid wages through its Rights and Responsibilities project, which ensures that day laborers receive the education and organization required to prevent wage theft.

Voz has successfully collected over \$300,000 of unpaid wages

Despite such local efforts, Oregon had more than 8,500 wage claims between mid-2006 to mid-2012, accounting for more than \$24 million. These figures only include cases that were reported to the Bureau of Labor and Industries. Oregon still needs state policies to strengthen worker protections and close loopholes in current employment law to guarantee that all workers are paid the wages they have legally earned. Look for opportunities to be involved during the 2013 State Legislative Session.

This Labor Day, read up on this issue and share what you’ve learned with your parishioners with the Oregon Coalition to Stop Wage Theft’s Interfaith Resource Packet. While it is written, “Woe to him who builds his house on wrongdoing, his roof-chambers on injustice; who works his neighbors without pay, and gives them no wages” (Jeremiah 22:13), people of all faiths must work here on earth to remedy this injustice.



Office of Life, Justice, and Peace