

WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

EYE ON THE CAPITOL

May 14, 2015

MINIMUM WAGE IS OUR RECOGNITION OF THE DIGNITY OF ALL WHO WORK

By John Huebscher, Executive Director

We often hear it said that having a job gives people dignity. That is not quite right. The dignity inherent in every human being is a gift from the loving God who created us. This human dignity is ours when we are too young to work. And we retain it when we are too ill, too disabled, or too old to work or when unemployed.

What work does is provide a venue for us to witness our dignity through the sharing of our gifts and talents. Our work, as St. John Paul II wrote, is a means by which we contribute to God's creative design and to our own fulfillment as people. And it is this expression of our humanity and our talents that gives dignity to the work we do.

That is why, when discussing economic matters, the Church affirms that labor is prior to capital. Or, to put it another way, people are more important than the tools they use. It is worth noting that Abraham Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt argued the same point in discussing the issues of their day.

The dignity of all who work is why Catholic teaching affirms the justice of a living wage and asserts that such a wage is due every worker. It is why the issue of the minimum wage is central to any discussion of justice in our society. Some say that the minimum wage serves no purpose today. Not so. The purpose of the minimum wage is timeless. It is a standard that says the dignity of all who work, whatever their station in life, must be sufficiently valued and compensated to allow them to live an existence that is truly human.

Our ancestors recognized this, and the minimum wage was once set at a level to allow workers to live such an existence. But for decades now, this covenant has not been kept. The minimum wage today is worth less than it was in the mid-1960s. Consequently our economic policies have failed a basic test of justice. And this failure has fostered the income inequality that afflicts our state and nation and limits the future of so many people. Data from the Economic Policy Institute tells us this about who the minimum wage-earners are in today's economy:

- 89% are over 20 years of age;
- 37% are over 40;
- 28% are parents;
- 57% are full-time workers;
- 56% are women and;
- one in four mothers who work earns the minimum wage.

The men and women who work in minimum wage jobs may not frequent political fundraisers or bankroll unregulated issue ads. But they are our friends and neighbors. They share our dreams, aspirations, and responsibilities. Most important, they have the same moral claim to a living wage as those more advantaged.

Fortunately, there is renewed interest in the issue of wages and increasing the minimum wage. Here in Wisconsin and nationally, citizens and political leaders are talking seriously about proposals to raise the minimum wage to a level commensurate with its purpose. Raising the minimum wage also enjoys popular support in our state. A recent Marquette Law School poll found that 57 percent of those responding favor a higher minimum wage.

We have reason to be hopeful that as a community we will once more honor the dignity of all who work by making sure that their compensation for that work honors their innate worth as human beings. We should at least try to make it happen.

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