



## WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

### EYE ON THE CAPITOL

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#### **KEEPING MINIMUM WAGE JUST IS ONGOING RESPONSIBILITY**

By John Huebscher, Executive Director

A common message of Catholic social thought and teaching is that those who work for wages must be justly compensated. This teaching is grounded in our conviction that the value of work is grounded in the dignity of the human beings who do it. Just as every life has value, so too does every worker have dignity. Wages are a critical way by which we recognize that dignity.

But the work we do is not only about the worker. It is also about those who rely on the worker for their daily bread. As Pope John Paul II wrote in his 1981 encyclical letter on work, *Laborem Exercens*, the right of every person to a job is grounded in the twin responsibility to develop (at a minimum) one's own God given skills to the fullest and to provide for one's own needs and those of one's family.

Thus Catholic social teaching has long defined a just wage in terms of a "family wage," or that necessary to meet the needs of a family. For nearly a hundred years, the church has addressed such compensation in the context of a "family wage" or a wage adequate to allow a worker to meet not only his or her own needs, but also those of family members who rely on him/her as a main wage earner.

That is why state Catholic conferences generally support the idea of raising the minimum wage when lawmakers consider proposals to raise the minimum wage. This was the case on August 28, when the WCC submitted written testimony in support of Senate Bill 130.

Not only does SB 130 raise the minimum wage to \$7.25 an hour, but it also directs the Department of Workforce Development to annually adjust the wage to keep pace with changes in the consumer price index. This change is long overdue. One of the deficiencies in modern social policy is that the minimum wage lags behind the cost of living. Since the 1950's the minimum wage has lost so much ground to inflation that recent increases still leave it well below the buying power it enjoyed 50 years ago.

John Paul II asserted that the responsibility to treat workers justly is not limited to those who hire them. This duty extends to all persons and institutions such as government, financial organizations, and others who influence the structures and conditions in which work is performed. Pope John Paul II referred to these entities as "indirect employers."

In a democracy and consumer-driven economy such as ours, those of us who are voters and consumers can be thought of as “indirect employers” to the extent that our choices govern decisions in the market place. As another summer vacation season draws to a close, we may wish to think of the minimum wage workers who are employed in the service sector, especially in the retail trade, leisure and hospitality industries. As we do so, we might just ask ourselves:

What are the service workers who make our leisure activities possible able to buy with the wages they earn?

Are their wages sufficient to pay for their essential needs?

Those seem like valid questions as we ponder the value of our minimum wage workers in these days after Labor Day 2007.