

## Worker Justice - 2004

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You shall not abuse a needy and destitute laborer, whether a fellow country-man or a stranger in one of the communities of your land.

Deuteronomy 24:14

### Issue

Many workers in both the U.S. and Canada are unable to provide for their own basic needs and those of their families despite working full time at jobs that are vital to our society.

### Background

In 1944 the Executive Board of The National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods, now Women of Reform Judaism, passed its first resolution supporting fair employment practices. Since that time we have advocated responding to the needs of the elderly (1983); equal pay for women (1985); emergency assistance to farmers and pregnant teenagers (1987); and parental and medical leave (1987). More recently we have expressed concern about labor abuses and the systematic changes in welfare and social assistance in both Canada and the United States (1994-2001).

Today many productive workers still live in, or on the edge of, poverty. There are specific instructions throughout the Torah on the proper treatment of workers. Jewish tradition clearly demands that workers be reimbursed adequately for their labor and that they not be abused. Today this means ensuring safe and clean working conditions, a fair wage, adequate insurance coverage, and benefits.

Within both Canada and the United States some categories of workers are paid less than a living wage. In the United States alone 2.5 million Americans who work full time still live in poverty. Many of these workers are women who are struggling to feed and clothe their children. Many are recent immigrants or seasonal workers. They fill necessary but messy, dangerous, and unglamorous jobs. They often work in hazardous situations and have high rates of workplace-related injuries. They seldom have employment benefits such as medical insurance or vacation coverage. They can be grouped into three broad labor categories: service providers, migrant workers, and production workers.

### Service Providers

For many years economists have predicted that the fastest-growing sector of our economies will be the service sector. Included within this sector are workers who provide health care-related services, such as home care. Women of Reform Judaism has a long history of support for quality care for the elderly and disabled. That care is severely compromised by low wages, lack of benefits, and lack of training, which lead to high turnover rates, jeopardizing both the quality and continuity of care. This situation also applies to personal care assistants, nursing assistants, home health aides, food service providers, and cleaning personnel and other workers who provide services within homes and institutions.

More than 4 million people depend upon the services provided by home care workers to be able to remain in their homes and to avoid long-term stays in institutions. This number will grow as our population continues to age. These workers care for the most vulnerable members of our families: the elderly and disabled who are among society's most infirm and isolated individuals. The Romanow Report, *Building on Values: The Future of*

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Health Care in Canada (Canadian Government Publishing, November 2002), estimated that home care saves the Canadian government \$8000 per patient per year. These workers, however, often must struggle to meet their own basic needs, lacking both benefits and a living wage.

Ensuring quality care to long-term care consumers also requires improved recruitment and retention of personnel, which depends upon paying workers sufficient wages and benefits, as well as changing employer practices to support quality training and provide supervision and the potential for career advancement.

Service providers who clean our hotels and office buildings are also seriously under-compensated. These workers are usually immigrants with limited ability to speak English. Women of Reform Judaism and the Union for Reform Judaism have firm commitments to workers, and the Central Conference of American Rabbis has spoken out about its support of unions. Based upon these positions, the Reform Jewish community in several large cities has joined with the National Interfaith Committee for Worker Justice to support the efforts of janitors to obtain adequate wages, greater opportunity for full time work, and health insurance coverage.

### **Migrant Workers**

Migrant workers face an array of issues and problems that have not been adequately addressed, if at all. Even in Canada where there is not the additional issue of undocumented workers, many workers are reluctant to stand up for their rights because employers find it easier to send workers home instead of dealing with their serious concerns.

Most of the 16,000 workers who participate in Canada's migrant labor program are small farmers from Mexico and the Caribbean who are forced to migrate in order to earn a living. The Mexico-Canada program is seen as a model for migration programs. Workers are carefully screened before being hired, almost all return to Mexico at the end of their job, and most reapply for the next growing season. Even within this program, however, the lack of national standards for seasonal farm workers permits wages to be set at minimum levels and excludes workers from health and safety regulations. Migrant workers perform the rigorous and often dangerous rural labor that few Canadians want to do. Separated from their families and isolated in rural areas, the migrant Mexican farm workers have complained that they are forced to spray pesticides without protective covering, live in overcrowded buildings and put in long hours without overtime pay.

Today most migrant workers in the United States also come from Mexico and the Caribbean. In addition, citizens of the United States, as well as documented and undocumented aliens from nations other than Mexico and those of the Caribbean, also follow the crops throughout the country. Despite the importance of these workers to the production of our food and the economy, they are among the most marginalized laborers in North America.

Farm workers are forced to accept low wages that are insufficient to provide food for their families as a condition of employment and are often subjected to deplorable working conditions. Agriculture is one of the most hazardous occupations in the U.S. The death rate among workers is estimated at 20.9 workers per 100,000 workers, compared to the average for all industries of 3.9 workers. Of the 2.5 million farm workers in the United States, 1.8 million work directly on crops that are treated with pesticides. Exposure to pesticides can cause both acute and long-term effects, and the lack of basic hand-washing and bathing facilities exacerbates the problem. The University of San Francisco School of Law International Human Rights Clinic documents specific violations of migrant worker rights, in particular the right to organize, the right to health services, and the right to be free from slave-like conditions.

Some foreign workers obtain special visas for domestic employment that are linked to their employers, so that in most cases these workers cannot legally leave their employers if conditions become intolerable. If they do leave their employers, such workers can lose their immigration status and be deported. Recent incidents of

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mistreatment of Philippine women who came to the United States on these special visas have raised awareness of the potential for criminal abuse.

### **Production Workers**

The category of production workers includes women working in the garment industry and in the commercial laundering industry across the continent. One of the largest industrial launderers has 27,000 employees in the United States and Canada. These workers are predominantly female, people of color and recent immigrants. Their pay of \$6.50 an hour leaves such full-time workers far below the poverty line in both countries.

### **Resolution**

Jewish tradition recognizes the value of work and requires that workers be fairly compensated with adequate wages, benefits and protection. Our tradition further stipulates that these precepts apply equally to our neighbors and to the stranger within our community. Women of Reform Judaism resolves to seek legislation to require a living wage, health coverage and other benefits for all workers and calls upon its affiliates to:

1. Educate their members and other congregants about the Jewish mandate that we are all responsible for the treatment of those who work for us in our homes, our congregations and our communities;
2. Become informed about the working conditions of service providers, production workers and migrant farm workers in or near their communities;
3. Support the monitoring of working conditions of women in the special visa for domestic employment category to prevent abuse;
4. Advocate legislation to support a stable workforce that can provide quality care for long-term care consumers;
5. Join with other religious and community groups to obtain adequate wages, benefits, training and working conditions for all workers, whether resident or migrant, recognizing the need to explore ways to help small businesses (up to 25 workers) cover the cost of providing benefits and other worker services; and
6. Work to prevent the erosion of fair labor practices and standards.