

Jesus : a Low-Wage Worker

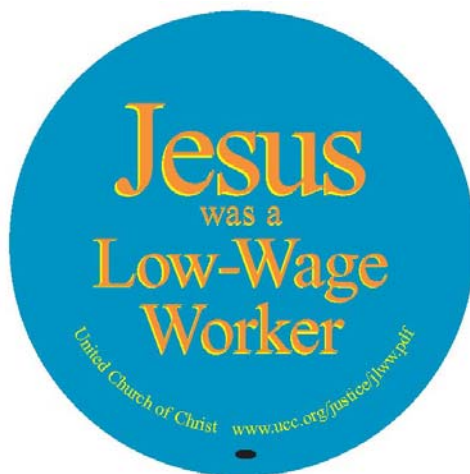
Jesus was a low-wage worker, just like too many workers in the U.S. today. Nurses aides, hotel housekeepers, farm workers, day laborers, early childcare specialists, fast food workers, retail sales clerks, and custodians are examples of workers who provide needed services but who usually receive wages so low that they cannot keep a family out of poverty. Jobs should lift workers out of poverty, not keep them there. We sometimes justify poverty wages by assuming certain workers are not worth more, are not worthy of living wages. But *all* workers are children of God, made in God's image. They deserve a living wage.

Too many low-wage jobs -- One-quarter of all jobs in the U.S. pay poverty-level wages – a wage so low that a full-time worker cannot keep a family out of poverty. These jobs are more likely to be held by women and people of color – marginal jobs for too often marginalized people. Just like Jesus. The table below shows who holds these jobs, based on sex and race/ethnicity. For example, 26% of African American men hold poverty jobs.

	<u>Both sexes</u>	<u>Men</u>	<u>Women</u>
All races	24%	20%	29%
Euro Amer.	20%	15%	26%
African Amer.	30%	26%	34%
Hispanic	40%	36%	46%

No benefits and difficult work conditions -- Low-wage jobs are less likely to provide health insurance, a pension, or even paid sick leave. They are more likely to require evening, night, weekend, or rotating shifts. They are more likely to be part time.

Less upward mobility -- These jobs are seldom ladders to better opportunities. Today moving up the ladder – for example, moving from low-income or working class up to middle income – is harder (and achieved less often) than in the past.



(request buttons at jwm@ucc.org)

Education is not the answer -- While more education can improve the job prospects for an individual, education of workers will not improve these *jobs*. Even if all workers were college graduates, we would still need people to sweep floors, and care for our children and elders. These jobs would still be poverty jobs. The problem is not the worker but the job.

Unsafe -- Low-wage jobs are more likely to be dangerous or unsafe. Each year more than one out of every four meat-packing workers in the U.S. suffers an injury or work-related illness that requires medical attention beyond first aid. One out of every seven poultry processing workers is injured or becomes ill due to their job each year.

What to Do about Poverty Jobs

Workers need jobs. If all they can find is a poverty job, they have to take it. But workers acting together with their allies can improve their workplaces and gain dignity on the job. Poverty jobs can be changed into life-enhancing jobs if we actively work to make this happen.

Raise the minimum wage -- We need to increase the minimum wage. A bill currently in Congress would raise it to \$7.25 over a two year period, helping about 15 ½ million workers. This new wage won't be high enough but it is an important first step. Get involved with the Let Justice Roll Living Wage Campaign of the National Council of Churches and Center for Community Change (www.LetJusticeRoll.org). Support efforts to raise state minimum wages and pass living wage laws.

Strengthen the right to organize -- We need to strengthen the right of all workers to form and join unions. Unions are one of the best ways for workers to improve their wages and working conditions. We are indebted to union struggles of the past for many of the workplace benefits and social supports that we take for granted. God gave us the Sabbath but unions brought us the weekend, the 8-hour day, paid vacations and holidays, health insurance, and pensions.

The right to organize is a basic human right, included in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. But this right has been eroded in the U.S. In 31% of all efforts to form unions, workers are illegally fired, solely for their union organizing efforts. All together, 10% of workers who try to form a union are illegally fired. Too often employers engage in coercive tactics that interfere with workers' right to choose union representation. Legislation is needed to strengthen the right to organize and increase penalties for firms that violate this right. The Employee Free Choice Act, currently being considered by Congress, should be passed.

Change Unfair International Trade Agreements -- Laws that govern international trade and investment typically put workers – in the U.S. and around the world – at a disadvantage. Free trade and investment agreements usually mean freedom for corporations to move where wages are lowest, workers are least able to speak out, and safeguards for both labor and the environment are weakest. This hurts workers in the U.S. and those in other countries. There is a growing international movement to oppose these treaties in favor of others that put workers and corporations on a more level playing field. Work to defeat the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) and Free Trade Area of the America (FTAA) unless these agreements are greatly improved.

Low-wage workers are high-value children of God. All jobs must provide fair and adequate wages, benefits, and working conditions. Workers must be able to support themselves and their families, and live with dignity the life of wholeness that God intends for all. God's reign does not stop at the door to the workplace but extends to all aspects of life including our work lives.

For more information, contact Edith Rasell, Minister for Labor Relations and Community Economic Development, 700 Prospect Ave., Cleveland, OH 44115-1100; toll free 1-866-822-8224, ext 3709; raselle@ucc.org