



**INTERFAITH WORKER JUSTICE**

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# Workers' Rights – A Cornerstone of Social Justice

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا كُونُوا قَوَّامِينَ لِلَّهِ شُهَدَاءَ بِالْقِسْطِ وَلَا يَجْرِمَنَّكُمْ شَنَا نُ قَوْمٍ عَلَىٰ أَلَّا تَعْدِلُوا  
اعْدِلُوا هُوَ أَقْرَبُ لِلتَّقْوَىٰ وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ إِنَّ اللَّهَ خَبِيرٌ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿المائدة ٨﴾

**“O you who believe!**

**Be steadfast witnesses for God in equity...Deal justly, that is nearer to your duty”** (*Quran 5:8*).

Some may not think of the theme of labor rights as being of central relevance to religious, or specifically Islamic, teachings. However, it is an issue that affects each one of us, and our *deen* (faith) offers clear guidance regarding the rights and responsibilities of the worker and employer to each other. If we work for our living, whether as an employee or an employer, we spend a great deal of our time at our work, and it is our duty to understand and uphold the rights of workers.

Labor rights are directly connected to Islam; social justice is a central Islamic theme. The guidance toward social justice in Islam is intended to promote and maintain social order, harmony, balance and general welfare. It is a comprehensive system that balances personal needs with the general good, so that one complements the other. Islam is both a religion and a comprehensive way of life and exemplifies justice for its practitioners. It is a formula that will satisfy anyone's moral and spiritual needs as well as natural aspirations. Islam instructs people on how to live in harmony and peace with others, regardless of socio-economic status, race, gender or faith.

The Islamic concept of justice is based on equality and human dignity. God has enjoined justice and righteousness for all humans in all matters including but not limited to family matters, workers' issues, trade and all relationships.

## Mercy and Compassion

As in all matters, we are reminded that all human beings are created equal. If one of us is given a position of authority (such as an employer) over another, we have an obligation to treat our fellow creatures with compassion and fairness.

روى الإمام البخاري ومسلم عن أبي ذر رضي الله عنه أن النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم قال: "إخوانكم خولكم، جعلهم الله تحت أيديكم، فمن كان أخوه تحت يده فليطعمه مما يأكل وليلبسه مما يلبس، ولا تكلفوهم ما يغلبهم، فإن كلفتموهم ما يغلبهم فأعينوهم".

Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings of God be upon him, said, "Your servants/workers are your brothers whom God the most High has placed under your authority. Therefore, a person who has a brother under his authority, should feed him out of that which he eats himself and should dress him with the same kind of clothes which he wears himself; he should not assign work to him which is beyond his capacity, and if you do so, then help him in his work" (Bukhari collection).

روى البخاري ومسلم في صحيحه عن أبي هريرة رضي الله عنه عن النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم أنه قال: "إذا أتى أحدكم خادمه بطعامه فإن لم يجلسه معه فليناوله لقمَةً أو لقمَتين أو أكلة أو أكلتين، فإنه ولي علاجه" أي: تولى صنعه وعمله.

Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings of God be upon him, said, "When your cook or servant brings your meal to you, if you do not invite him to sit with you and eat, at least give him some of the meal to take. After all, it was he who prepared it." (Bukhari Collection)

وقد صح عن الرسول صلى الله عليه وسلم أنه قال: "الراحمون يرحمهم الرحمن، ارحموا من في الأرض يرحمكم من في السماء".

Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings of God be upon him, also said, "Those who have mercy on others will receive the mercy from the Most Compassionate, God. Be merciful to those in the Earth, then the One in the Heaven, God, will be merciful to you"

## Fulfill Fair Pay, and Promptly

With the same reasoning, the worker has the right to expect fair treatment and payment from his or her employer. In Islam, workers' rights are made clear:

وَيَا قَوْمِ أَوْفُوا الْمِكْيَالَ وَالْمِيزَانَ بِالْقِسْطِ وَلَا تَبْخَسُوا النَّاسَ أَشْيَاءَهُمْ وَلَا تَعْثَوْا فِي الْأَرْضِ مُفْسِدِينَ ﴿هُود ٨٥﴾

“And O my people! Give just measure and weight, nor withhold from the people the things that are their due” (Quran 11:85).

The employer-worker relationship must be based on justice and mutual consent, honoring the dignity of the worker. To illustrate this, it is ordained that workers' wages should be clearly agreed upon before a worker commences his or her work, and these wages must be paid promptly.

صح عن الرسول صلى الله عليه وسلم أنه قال: “أعطوا الأجير أجره قبل أن يجفّ عرقه”

More so, the Prophet Muhammad said, “Give the employee his wages before his sweat has had time to dry.” (Ibn Majah collection)

ولولا عظم هذا الذنب لم يتكفل الرسول أن يدافع عن مثل هؤلاء الأجراء عند الله يوم القيامة، روى الإمام البخاري أن النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم قال: “ثلاثة أنا خصمهم يوم القيامة: رجل أعطى بي ثم غدر، ورجل باع حرًا فأكل ثمنه، ورجل استأجر أجيرًا فاستوفى منه ولم يعطه أجرته.”

Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings of God be upon him, also said, “I will be the opponent of three types of people on the Day of Judgment,” and he listed one of them as “one who hires a worker, but does not pay him his right wages owed to him after fulfilling his work.” (Bukhari collection)

## Justice and Fairness

في الحديث القدسي: “يا عبادي، إني حرّمتُ الظلمَ على نفسي، وجعلته بينكم محرّمًا، فلا تظالموا”

In the Qudsi Hadith, it is narrated that God says, “O my servants, I have made injustice forbidden on me and I made it forbidden for you among yourselves, so do not engage in oppression or injustice.”

وفي الصحيح قال النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم: "اتقوا الظلم؛ فإن الظلم ظلمات يوم القيامة".

Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings of God be upon him, said, "Beware of committing injustice because injustice turns into a punishment of darkness on the Day of Judgment." (Sahih Hadith)

It is also required of employers not to give workers tasks beyond their capacity. Employers are accountable for their workers and have to ensure that their workers are justly treated at all times.

## Mutual Work Ethics

It is the characteristic of a believer to fulfill promises and abide by agreements. In the Quran, God

وَالَّذِينَ هُمْ لِأَمَانَاتِهِمْ وَعَهْدِهِمْ رَاعُونَ ﴿٨﴾ الْمُؤْمِنُونَ: ﴿٨﴾

describes the believers as: "those who are faithfully true to their trusts (all the duties which God has ordained, honesty, moral responsibility and trusts) and to their covenants." (Quran 23:8)

However, there must be equilibrium. As employers have responsibilities toward their workers, employees too have obligations toward their employers.

عَنْ عَائِشَةَ ، أَنَّ النَّبِيَّ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ قَالَ : "إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُحِبُّ إِذَا عَمِلَ أَحَدُكُمْ عَمَلًا أَنْ يُتَّقِنَهُ."

The Prophet, peace and blessings of God be upon him, said "God likes, if one of you performs a piece of work, that he should do it well."

This saying of the Prophet reminds us that a Muslim who is entrusted with a job should do it to the best of his or her ability.

## Our Role

- Live by the Islamic ethics of compassion, justice, honesty. We must be mindful of them in every situation, including in our roles as employer or employee.
- Be part of the political, economic, and social struggle to defend workers' rights to fair living wages, healthcare, a safe work environment, the right to organize, the right to enjoy religious freedom, and the like.

As Muslims, we know that working towards establishing social justice is a mandate of our faith. The concept of equality in labor laws is prerequisite to attaining social justice.

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