



# A COVENANT FOR WORKERS

**TAKING A STAND AGAINST PROFIT-AT-ANY-COST**

BY RENAYE MANLEY

**A**s I write this, we are in the midst of the “Great Recession.” The official unemployment rate hovers at 10 percent and is significantly higher for communities of color and those under the age of 25. The foreclosure rate is higher than it has been in 15 years, and we have lost over 10 million jobs since the recession began. These numbers cannot begin to illustrate the volume of pain that families, communities, and churches are carrying.

Working families are facing an economic crisis unlike anything we’ve seen since the 1930s—while debates rage over bonuses for executives at investment firms and big banks that needed government bailouts less than a year ago. Since December 2007 we have lost over 8.4 million jobs. Layoffs and cutbacks are affecting everyone from teachers to airline pilots. Public institutions, including libraries and post offices, are closing. If you are fortunate enough to have a job, things aren’t much better. Those who hold jobs feel anxiety that makes them increasingly vulnerable to exploitation by unscrupulous employers seeking to maximize profits in this challenging economic environment.

I remember a time when things were different. I grew up in East Chicago, Ind., in the shadow of Inland Steel, US Steel, and Amoco Oil. Unions were strong and powerful, at least where I grew up. Since the unions were strong, they set the standards for other employers. You could work and expect to be treated fairly. You could get a job and expect to have health

insurance and the opportunity to retire with dignity. You wouldn’t get rich, but you could buy a house and a car and help your 2.5 children go to college. Diverse political views were seen as the product of a robust democracy, and folks could disagree in an agreeable manner. Things were by no means perfect, but there was a “moral contract” in which companies profited and workers and communities benefited from the shared prosperity.

Unfortunately, that moral contract has all but disappeared. Today employees are often seen as dispensable commodities. Business ethics have devolved to a point where it is not just about profit but about profit at all costs. There is no incentive to treat workers or their communities fairly. From Enron to Massey Energy, we have seen lives destroyed and sacrificed due to egregious corporate behavior that has gone unchecked.

It is time to embrace a covenant for workers. It is time to reestablish the “moral contract” that represents the promise of justice and fairness for all of us. The word “covenant” has sev-



**“Look! The wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty.” JAMES 5:4**

eral definitions but is used in general to represent a type of promise. For people of the Abrahamic faiths, it represents a sacred promise, one that is sealed and witnessed by God.

The Bible is filled with covenants—promises made between humans but also, and more importantly, between God and humans. God, an all-powerful agent, enters into covenants with created beings who are extremely vulnerable agents. Throughout the ages, God remembers and honors his promises—to Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Isaac, and Moses—and Jesus refers to his own blood, which he shed for us, as the “new covenant.” These “contracts” give otherwise powerless people a share of the power. We can hold up these covenants to God, saying, “Remember? You said you would protect and prosper us in exchange for our obedience, forgive us and make us righteous in your sight.” God never forgets or ignores his covenants.

God loves justice, hates robbery and iniquity, and in his faithfulness rewards his people and makes an everlasting covenant with them (Is. 61:8). In this, God provides us with a poignant example of how to treat each other. If God, who is perfect and holy and has all rights, humbles himself to make an oath with imperfect and powerless people like us, surely people in positions of power are called to have humility and a sense of justice with which to make covenants with their economically weaker brothers and sisters. This power-sharing allows the weaker folks to say, “Remember? You said you would protect and provide for us in exchange for our hard work.”

Just as God enters into covenants with his people, we must look at establishing a covenant for workers today. As people of faith, we must be at the forefront of reestablishing the “moral contract” for economic justice required to fight poverty and the systematic economic exclusion that prevents working families from having a chance to live in dignity.

Several principals provide the critical framework for a covenant for worker justice. They are based upon principles established by Interfaith Worker Justice (the organization for which I work) as a faith-based response to the economic crisis.

**Job creation and retention efforts must be targeted to reach the most vulnerable populations and regions.** This is an essential element of any true covenant for worker justice. In Matthew 25, Jesus advises us that our treatment of society’s most vulnerable people reflects our relationship with him. African American and immigrant communities have borne the brunt of the economic downturn. Unemployment among African American youth (ages 16–24) in 2009 was an astounding 31.2 percent.<sup>1</sup> Immigrant workers are facing an onslaught of “wage theft,” robbing them of vitally needed resources as well as their dignity. Children of color are 30 percent more likely than white children to live below the poverty line.

**New jobs that are created should generate a long-term pathway to employment and provide living wages and benefits.** What could be more demoralizing than to have a job and still have to apply for food stamps or assistance with utilities? As the country struggles with the long-term impact of the recession and possible solutions to it, we must encourage our political leaders to seek and implement plans that will create living-wage jobs with benefits. We must recognize that short-term solutions are not a viable option. A true covenant for worker justice would provide opportunities and create jobs that enable families to sustain themselves.

**The safety net must be restored for the unemployed and the poor, including extended unemployment compensation, income support, and healthcare.** Not much of a safety net exists for low-wage workers. They don’t have paid sick days, meaning that a cold or flu means lost wages at the very least, and possibly even job loss. In most communities, the waiting list for subsidized childcare is months long, resulting in lost employment opportunities or substandard childcare. Unemployment compensation for most people will only last six to 12 months, and many part-time workers, domestic workers, and “contract” employees will not even be eligible for that. Even with the passage of federal healthcare legislation, most people will not receive the mandated coverage until 2014. A true covenant for worker justice will assist families who are sidetracked by temporary unemployment.

And finally, **a true covenant for worker justice must include provisions that enable workers to confront injustices that they experience on the job.** There must be processes that enable workers to address situations at work. Strengthening enforcement of labor laws is a good start. Ensuring that employers who engage in wage theft are held accountable is one example. Enabling workers to join together and bargain collectively is another. Labor law reform that takes into consideration the dynamics and realities of the 21st-century economy is critical to a real covenant for worker justice.

The recession presents challenges for those who are called to the work of justice. But it also presents an opportunity for us to create a new paradigm for worker justice, one based on principles that our faith demands. ■

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1. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Table 2: Employment status of the civilian noninstitutional population 16 to 24 years of age by sex, race, and Hispanic or Latino ethnicity, July 2006–2009 (<http://www.bls.gov/news.release/youth.t02.htm>)