

Thou Shalt Not Steal Stop Wage Theft

Walter Jaspas is a natural leader. He is gregarious and smart. He encourages others to do their best. He was a natural leader of the car wash workers employed by Shur Brite car wash in Nashville, Tennessee.

Although Shur Brite's managers prospered, they pocketed ill-gotten gains by cheating workers of wages. Walter and his colleagues were expected to show up each day at 8 a.m., but they weren't "clocked in" until the first car showed up. When the car left the carwash, they were clocked back out again. Even though they were expected to be on site for 12 or more hours a day, they were only paid for six or seven hours.

The workers were also upset about how they were treated. "We were treated like fixtures on a machine, not human beings," claims Walter Jaspas. "The owners wouldn't even thank us for our work." Workers were concerned about the cleaning chemicals they were exposed to and wanted a break room where they could relax and get warm in the winter and cool in the summer.

The Nashville Homeless Power Project and Middle Tennessee Jobs with Justice/Interfaith Worker Justice supported the workers desire to get paid fairly and be treated with respect and dignity.

The workers filed a lawsuit and then began organizing events to pressure the employer to pay them and address their concerns. They marched on the boss, they wrote letters and they held membership meetings twice a month. After a year of activity and multiple negotiation sessions with the employer, the workers were repaid \$130,000 in unpaid wages. Equally important to Walter and his colleagues, the employer created a nice break room and began thanking them for their work.



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What You Can Do to Stop Wage Theft

Wage theft – underpaying or not paying wages legally owed workers – is a national crisis. Unethical employers are stealing billions of dollars from millions of workers. Although some employers complain that labor laws are complicated, which is indeed true, the underpayment of wages has such serious consequences for workers and their families that employers must take their wage-payment responsibilities seriously.

The religious commandments against theft, including wage theft, are clear. Thou shalt not steal. Luckily, there are many things we can do to stop, reduce and deter wage theft.

1) Make sure those you or your congregation hire are paid fairly. Especially be careful when you:

- Hire a contractor. Are all the workers paid fairly? Be sure to ask as part of the bidding process.
- Leave a tip. Will the wait-staff receive it?
- Hire a service person. Ask how much the service person is paid and if the person is paid overtime (although not all service professions are required to pay overtime, many are).

2) Learn more about wage theft so you can talk with your friends and colleagues about the problems. You can:

- Read *Wage Theft in America: Why Millions of Americans are Not Getting Paid and What You Can Do about It*.
- Organize a wage theft forum lifting up wage theft problems in your community.
- Visit www.CanMyBossDoThat.com to learn if you have been a victim of wage theft.

3) Support policy initiatives to stop and deter wage theft. You can:

- Contact your Congressional leaders in support of the Stop Wage Theft bill. Send e-mails directly from www.iwj.org.
- Support local wage theft initiatives coordinated by community-based workers centers.
- Join the Interfaith Worker Justice e-mail action list. Sign up at www.iwj.org.

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