

**Rights of Workers**  
**The United Methodist Church 2008 Book of Resolutions**  
*Adopted by General Conference on April 30, 2008*

I. Biblical/Theological Background

Scripture teaches that human beings, created in the image of God, have an innate dignity (Genesis 1:27). God grants dignity to work by commanding human beings to be stewards of the land and to till and keep the earth (Genesis 1:28, 2:15). Work is one way through which human beings exercise their God-given creativity.

Scripture also teaches that an economic system should be ordered so that employees receive justice at their place of work and that concern for right relationships among people and with all of creation should be the heart of any economic system. Society and its institutions are to be structured so that marginalized persons participate fully in the shaping of society and their own future. Both the Old and the New Testaments show God's desire that wealth and prosperity of society be shared. God's Covenant with the Jewish people required them to respect the gifts that God gave them and share them with one another. God condemned the bondage and abusive conditions the Pharaoh imposed upon the Israelites. The Hebrew Prophets decried the growing disparities of wealth and poverty. The Book of Acts describes an early Christian community that shared its goods with one another and throughout both Testaments, God's people are urged to give special concern for widows, orphans and immigrants. The basic principles are clear: all workers should be treated with respect and dignity, disparities of wealth and poverty should be avoided, workers should earn wages that sustain themselves and their families, and employers have a particular responsibility to treat workers fairly and empower them to organize to improve conditions.

The concern of The United Methodist Church for the dignity of workers and the rights of employees to act collectively is stated in the Social Principles. Both employer and union are called to "bargain in good faith within the frame work of the public interest" (§ 163B). In response to the increasing globalization of the economic system, the widening disparity between rich and poor, and attempts to deprive workers of their fundamental rights, the church reaffirms its position in support of workers and their right to organize.

II. Historic Witness of The United Methodist Church

Historically, The United Methodist Church has been concerned about the plight of working men and women. In the United States, we were among the first supporters of the labor movement where both lay and clergy members played leadership roles in supporting garment workers, textile workers, farm workers, factory workers and advocating passage of the Fair Labor Standards Act and the National Labor Relations Act. From our beginnings and across the globe, we have led the way in seeking improved conditions and stronger unions for workers. Through

public policy work, shareholder advocacy, and consumer power, the church and its members have sought to influence political and corporate decisions affecting working conditions around the world.

### III. Supporting Workers in the International Economy

Although the phenomenon of globalization has been occurring for hundreds of years, the pace of globalization has increased dramatically with the widespread mobility of capital and labor. Companies are no longer subject to the rules of one country and search the globe for resources, cheap labor and access to markets. Although there are social, economic and educational benefits to globalization, workers face many challenges in the new global economy. The rapid process of unchecked globalization in many countries has produced sweatshops, encouraged the contracting out of skilled workers to richer nations, undermined local food production, exacerbated child labor and forced labor, and drawn young people out of rural areas to urban ones or to other countries. Too few multinational corporations have taken leadership in setting higher standards for wages, benefits and working conditions, and fewer still have supported international workers' right to organize. Workers, governments and the church have had little ability to challenge the negative aspects of rapid globalization and improve working conditions around the world.

Despite the challenges and complexities of engaging in the international arena, The United Methodist Church is a participant in the global economy and thus must witness for justice in the international labor arena. To this end, The United Methodist Church:

- 1) Supports the conventions of the International Labor Organizations that advance safety in the workplace; freedom from bonded or forced labor; the elimination of discrimination in respect to employment and occupation; effective abolition of child labor; fair compensation; just supervision; and the right of collective action for employees in all nations. The United Methodist Church shall continue to seek ratification and enforcement of these conventions.
- 2) Encourages the General Board of Pensions and Health Benefits to continue to invest in companies that set high standards for treatment of workers throughout the world and to file or join shareholder resolutions that encourage such high standards.
- 3) Urges the General Board of Church and Society and the General Board of Global Ministries to partner with United Methodists around the globe and international advocacy organizations such as International Labor Rights Fund to challenge unjust working conditions
- 4) Urges the United States government to protect the rights of migrant workers through the ratification of the International Convention on the Rights of Migrant Workers and their Families.
- 5) Encourages United Methodist youth groups and mission trips to meet with sweatshop workers, factory workers, farm workers or trade unions to learn about working conditions and how they can improve conditions through personal actions and advocacy.

6) Lift up workers in prayer and reaffirm our belief in workers' rights on the Sunday nearest Labor Day or May Day

#### IV. Supporting Living Wages and the Sharing of Prosperity

Since 1908, the church has advocated for a living wage in every industry (1908 Social Creed) and continues to support the rights of workers to share fully in the prosperity of society.

Unfortunately, too many workers earn poverty wages with few benefits, and disparities are growing between high wage earners and low-wage earners. Despite rising productivity and profits in recent years, these gains have not been shared by a majority of workers. Therefore, the United Methodist Church:

1. Encourages all employers – and especially United Methodist employers – to share prosperity with workers and seek ways to reduce disparity between top and bottom wage earners. 2. Supports efforts in the U.S. Congress to raise the minimum wage to a living wage and index it to inflation, expand health care benefits to workers, expand and protect worker pension programs, set core national standards for workers for paid sick days and paid vacation days, and limit mandatory overtime.
3. Calls upon the U.S. Department of Labor to expand its targeted investigations of industries that routinely violate wage and hour laws, partner with workers' centers and congregations that are in ministry with low-wage and immigrant workers, and develop new print and on-line resources for educating workers about their rights in the workplace.
4. Affirms efforts by governments to explore new mechanisms and policies to improve standards for wages, benefits and conditions for workers in low-wage jobs.
5. Asks United Methodist Seminaries to expose seminary students to worker concerns through teaching, internships and field placement opportunities.
6. Urges the General Board of Church and Society and the General Board of Global Ministries to partner with organizations such as the National Farm Worker Ministry and Interfaith Worker Justice to engage United Methodists in education and advocacy to improve wages, benefits and working conditions for workers in low-wage jobs.

#### V. Supporting Workers' Right to Organize and Bargain Collectively

The United Methodist Church through its Social Principles recognizes and supports the right of workers to organize into unions of their own choosing and to bargain collectively regarding hours, wages and conditions of employment (Social Principles ¶163.B). Workers around the world are finding it harder and harder to form labor unions to achieve economic and social justice in the workplace. Many employers interfere with employees' efforts to exercise their right to unionize by firing or retaliating against union supporters, threatening to close their facilities, or speciously challenging bargaining units or election results.

Affirming its historic position and in response to new challenges facing workers, The United Methodist Church:

1. Calls upon United Methodist institutions and organizations to exemplify the teachings found in the Social Principles and to support the right of their employees to organize for collective bargaining.
2. Calls upon United Methodist agencies and congregations to use their purchasing and contracting dollars to support employers who pay living wages and support workers' right to organize.
3. Encourages all employers to respect workers' right to organize and recognize the inherent power that employers have over workers in most workplaces. This power over workers' livelihoods means that employers must be especially careful not to bully or threaten employees, if workers are indeed to experience a "freedom of association." In particular, employers are encouraged to clearly communicate to their employees that they are neutral on their employees' choice and will deal fairly with any union they select; abide by their employees' decision when a majority has signed union authorization cards or otherwise indicated their desire to be represented by a union, and refrain from using hearings, elections, and appeals as a means for delaying or avoiding representation for their employees. The United Methodist Church is particularly concerned about the unethical practices of locking workers out of their workplaces and permanently replacing striking workers.
4. Expresses additional concern about the erosion of rights guaranteed in the United States since 1935 by the National Labor Relations Act and urges adoption of legislation to reclaim these rights. This legislation should allow workers to choose union representation by signing cards, require mediation and binding arbitration if a first contract agreement is not reached in a reasonable period of time, and expand penalties for employers violating workers' right to organize.
5. Calls on all governments to take strong measures to prevent violent attacks against labor organizers and to engage in prompt and full prosecutions whenever such attacks occur;
6. Calls upon all workers and labor unions to refrain from violence, be truthful about employers and bargain in good faith. We also call upon United Methodists who are union members and leaders to express their Christian witness by promoting a prophetic witness, democratic process and financial integrity in their unions.

See Social Principles ¶ 163 B, C