

COMPENDIUM ON CHURCH'S SOCIAL TEACHING PART 78

The rights of workers: Fair remuneration and income distribution

By Nadine Bushell 10.12.06

Member of the Catholic Commission for Social Justice

Many employers do not understand the importance of fair wages for everyone to the overall well-being of the society. It has implications for the level of crime, the ability of children to access quality education, the ability of persons to find time for themselves and their families – some people have to work more than one job to make ends meet.

Often our prominent businessmen complain about high crime rates and how this negatively affects them and the general population. However, many of these entrepreneurs in their quest to not only make a profit, but to maximise it, do so at the expense of their employees.

Many persons such as store clerks, security guards and domestic workers who do not have tertiary education are often subject to poor wages. They, many times have to work long hours for these wages.

However, while they are at work, their children, and families are neglected. When children have to be picked up from school, their parents are at work, and often may not be able to afford to have anyone collect them from school because of low wages.

Further, when children get home – if there is no grandmother or aunt, children are largely unsupervised until parents return home late in the evening; again many persons cannot afford to pay someone to do this for them.

Time for ensuring a stable home is compromised. While “bosses” may be able to afford to hire persons to cook, clean and launder for them, many employees cannot do this because of low wages.

Employees sometimes are in the workplace as long as their bosses, in some cases longer and they are often not allowed the flexibility that their bosses are allowed. There is then a breakdown in family life, which leads to many of the social ills that business persons express concerns about.

Outlined below is the *Compendium's* perspective on fair wages and income distribution in the society.

“Remuneration is the most important means for achieving justice in work relationships (*Rerum Novarum*). The ‘just wage is the legitimate fruit of work’ (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*).

They commit grave injustice who refuse to pay a just wage or who do not give it in due time and in proportion to the work done (cf Lv 19:13; Dt 24:14-15; Jas 5:4). A salary is the instrument that permits the labourer to gain access to the goods of the earth. ‘Remuneration for labour is to be such that man may be furnished the means to cultivate worthily his own material, social,

cultural and spiritual life and that of his dependents, in view of the function and productiveness of each one, the conditions of the factory or workshop, and the common good (*Gaudium et Spes*).

The simple agreement between employee and employer with regard to the amount of pay to be received is not sufficient for the agreed-upon salary to qualify as a ‘just wage’, because a just wage ‘must not be below the level of subsistence’ (*Rerum Novarum*) of the worker: natural justice precedes and is above the freedom of the contract.”

“The economic well-being of a country is not measured exclusively by the quantity of goods it produces but also by taking into account the manner in which they are produced and the level of equity in the distribution of income, which should allow everyone access to what is necessary for their personal development and perfection”.

“An equitable distribution of income is to be sought on the basis of criteria not merely of commutative justice but also of social justice that is, considering, beyond the objective value of the work rendered, the human dignity of the subjects who perform it. Authentic economic well-being is pursued also by means of suitable social policies for the redistribution of income which, taking general conditions into account, look at merit as well as at the need of each citizen.”

Next week we discuss the right to strike.

Persons interested in purchasing the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* may contact the CCSJ at Archbishop’s House - 622-6680.