

Good morning! I am Rabbi Bonnie Margulis, Executive Director of Wisconsin Faith Voices for Justice. I want to thank Rev. Schaefer for inviting me to speak this morning, as part of Worker Justice Wisconsin's Labor in the Pulpit month. Wisconsin Faith Voices for Justice and Worker Justice Wisconsin jointly lead the Dignity at Work Coalition, which brings together faith communities, direct service organizations, advocacy organizations, and labor unions to advocate for a living wage, equal pay, sustainable hours, paid sick leave, paid family leave, affordable childcare, affordable housing, access to public transportation, an end to racial and gender discrimination in hiring and employment practices, pension protection, and the right to organize.

I know – that seems like a lot of issues to work on! Well, it is a lot! But what I want to focus on today is particularly low wage and immigrant workers, especially undocumented workers, who are the most vulnerable of all. The question I want to pose to you today is - As people of faith, what is our role in ensuring that low-wage and immigrant workers are treated with the dignity and respect they deserve?

While you ponder that question, let me share a story with you. Once it happened, as Passover neared, that Rabbi Israel Salanter came to a matzah factory to judge its fitness to receive a kosher certificate. Without that certificate, the matzah factory would be out of business. The owner of the factory wasn't worried, however. He was certain his factory would be certified kosher for Passover. He had instituted new protocols of efficiency that he was sure would impress Rabbi Salanter. Rabbi Salanter came in and observed the process in action. When the matzah was finished and the owner proudly presented it to Rabbi Salanter, the rabbi told the owner the matzah could not be certified as kosher. The owner was shocked. "Why, what's wrong with my matzah?". Rabbi Salanter replied, "The matzah has blood in it, and nothing with blood in it can be certified kosher." "Blood? There's no blood in my matzah!" exclaimed the factory owner. Rabbi Salanter said, "The way you press your workers and the demands you place on them to be ever more 'efficient' in their work, shows that their blood is in every piece of matzah they produce, and therefore I cannot consider this matzah kosher."

Judaism has a long history of support for worker justice. From earliest Biblical times through today, the rights and welfare of the worker has been a central concern. The foundational story of Judaism is rooted in the account of 400 years of slavery in Egypt that ended in the redemption of the Hebrew people. The experience of slavery colored the development of Jewish identity and Jewish law throughout the next three thousand years to the present day.

The constant refrain we read throughout the Hebrew Bible is a reminder us to be kind to the stranger in our midst, for 'you were strangers in the land of Egypt' (Ex. 22:21 et al). From here

evolves a body of law that today we characterize as social justice legislation, including justice for the laborer. For just as we Jews know what it was to be enslaved in Egypt, so we should have empathy for the workers among us.

Therefore, Jewish tradition is filled with laws safeguarding the rights of the worker.

This morning's text from Deuteronomy amplifies and clarifies the reasoning behind the verse in Leviticus 19 – 'do not leave the wages of your worker overnight.' Deuteronomy says:

"¹⁴ Do not take advantage of a hired worker who is poor and needy, whether that worker is a fellow Israelite or a foreigner residing in one of your towns. ¹⁵ Pay them their wages each day before sunset, because they are poor and are counting on it. Otherwise, they may cry to the LORD against you, and you will be guilty of sin." (Dt. 24:14-15).

Deuteronomy explains the vague requirement of the Leviticus text – the employer is not just forbidden to hold wages until morning, but more specifically, he must pay before the sun goes down. Why is this timeframe important? Because, the text tells us, workers have no reserves or other resources to pay their bills and meet their needs. A worker may not otherwise be able to buy himself dinner, or pay for a place to sleep that night, unless he has received his day's wages. Nor does it matter if they are citizens or immigrants or strangers. All must be treated with equal justice.

The American Baptist Churches USA has a long history of advocating for workers rights and for justice and dignity for the workers. As far back as 1957, the national American Baptist Churches passed a resolution calling for a pathway to citizenship; the right to peaceful protest and to organize and protection against retaliation for that organizing, for fair wages and safe working conditions, and for removing exceptions in child labor laws that allow children to work long hours in dangerous jobs.

A similar resolution passed in 1966 and affirmed several times since then says, in part, "Migratory labor problems of low wages, no benefits, substandard housing, unsafe travel and work conditions (including the presence of pesticides in the fields, water, and air), inaccessible medical services, resistance to organizing, inconsistent educational opportunities, and inadequate welfare assistance, continue to be acute. What was a problem for coastal states, is now a national concern."

It is amazing to me, and frustrating, how relevant these resolutions are today. So little has changed. Low-wage and particularly undocumented workers are subject to wage theft, paid less

than minimum wage, which is already horribly inadequate, work long hours under dangerous conditions, are subject to sexual harassment, and face retaliation if they complain. Because they are at risk for deportation, it is nearly impossible to complain or seek redress.

At the start of this talk, I posed a question to you – “As people of faith, what is our role in ensuring that low-wage and immigrant workers are treated with the dignity and respect they deserve?” The answer is to be found in the American Baptist Churches’ resolutions, which call upon members of Baptist churches to learn about these issues and advocate for legislation to bring dignity and quality of life for migrant workers. We have an opportunity now to respond to that call to action.

Today our workforce, here in Wisconsin and across the country, needs the faith community to raise our voices to support policies that make for dignified labor that allows workers to support their families. We need to be on the forefront of efforts to prevent attempts to roll back child labor laws; to support robust funding to shore up Wisconsin’s childcare system, which is on the brink of crisis, and funding for paid family medical leave which would help Wisconsin families care for sick children, elderly parents, and their own health without losing income or risking their jobs.

On August 8, Governor Evers called for a special session of the legislature to take place on September 20, 2023, to restore funding for these and other vital programs which the Joint Finance Committee had stripped from the Governor’s biennium budget proposal.

Over the last few years, whenever the Governor has called for a special session, the legislature has responded by opening the session and immediately closing it, without addressing the vital issues for which the Governor called them together. Please call or write your legislators this week and let them know you need them to take this call to action seriously, and to provide funding for these necessary programs. There is a template letter to legislators that you can use to call or write your senator and assembly member.

There are endless issues that need to be addressed, so much work to do. It can be overwhelming, and even paralyzing. But whenever I’m feeling that way, I turn to my favorite quote from the Talmud, from a tractate known as the Ethics of the Fathers – Rabbi Tarfon said, “you are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it”. In other words, if we each do our part, eventually the work will get done! Thank you all for doing your part!