



Labor in the Pulpits / On the Bimah / In the Minbar

SEPTEMBER 2024



Our theme for this year's Labor in the Pulpits/On the Bimah/in the Minbar program is "Sprouting the Seeds of Solidarity," with the image of a plant pushing through hard cement to blossom.

The image conveys how the struggle for worker justice often feels: difficult, but far from impossible! The workers we partner with are mostly immigrants, BIPOC, and nonunion, and they experience the highest rates of wage theft and unsafe working conditions. But they are fighting with strength and perseverance for just working conditions and a real voice in the workplace. They rely on your prayers and partnership to better the working conditions for all!

To participate in our Labor in the Pulpis/On the Bimah/In the Minbar program this year, all you need to do is register your congregation [HERE](#). When you register, you can also request for us to provide a guest speaker (the deadline for requesting a speaker is August 21). We'll reach out to you to confirm your registration.

For those who prefer to lead the service on your own, we have prepared a series of five resources for you to use. If you follow the resources in the order they are listed, selecting portions from each, you should have enough to formulate your entire service or education hour.

Resources include:

1. [Scriptural passages from the Abrahamic religions about worker justice](#)
2. [Industry in focus: Construction](#)
 - We provide information about the most common problems construction workers face, and share a video testimonial of a local construction worker and WJW member who, with his co-workers, recovered \$22,000 in stolen wages last year
3. [Statements from faith leaders about worker justice](#)
4. [Ways to get involved in worker justice](#)
5. [Ending prayer](#)

We hope these resources will be useful and inspiring. But don't hesitate to reach out if you have any questions. My email is rebecca@workerjustice.org. I look forward to celebrating Labor in the Pulpits/On the Bimah/in the Minbar with you!

In solidarity,



*Rebecca Meier-Rao, Executive Director
Worker Justice Wisconsin*

1. Scriptural passages from the Abrahamic religions about worker justice

Choose 1-2 passages to begin your service:

- Deuteronomy 5:13-15
 - The Sabbath is for everyone—all are allowed to rest from their work.
- Deuteronomy 14:28-29
 - The Lord blesses our work so that we may share its fruits with others.
- Deuteronomy 24:14-15
 - Do not withhold wages from your workers, for their livelihood depends on them.
- Sirach 34:26-27
 - To deprive an employee of wages is to commit murder.
- Isaiah 58:3-7
 - To observe religious practices, but oppress your workers is false worship.
- Jeremiah 22:13
 - Woe to him who treats his workers unjustly.
- Matthew 20:1-16
 - All workers should be paid a just and living wage.
- James 5:1-6
 - Those who become rich by abusing their workers have sinned against God.
- Qur'an 4:32
 - Workers shall have the benefit of what they earn
- Qur'an 83:1-3
 - Woe to those that deal in fraud

2. Industry in focus: Construction

Utilize all or some of this information to educate your congregation on what happens in construction sites all around us. End this section with the video of Marlon Velazquez.

Construction sites are ubiquitous in Madison. While some sites are run well, many of them are hubs for fraudulent activities like misclassification, wage theft and unsafe working conditions. These practices are targeted to recent Latinx immigrants, because contractors expect them not to know their rights or be too afraid to stand up for themselves. Worker Justice Wisconsin regularly engages with Spanish-speaking construction workers so they understand their rights and know how to exercise their collective power to change their unjust working conditions.

- **Misclassification is when an employer treats a worker who is an employee as an independent contractor. Employers do this to avoid paying payroll taxes, benefits and workers' compensation insurance. Misclassified workers are more likely to experience wage theft and unsafe working conditions.**
 - Did you know?
 - [More than 10% of construction workers are misclassified annually, and most of them are Latinx immigrants.](#)
 - [Misclassified construction workers earn about \\$23,500 less per year than correctly classified workers.](#)
- **Wage theft occurs any time an employer fails to pay a worker the minimum wage or according to the terms outlined in the employee's contract.**
 - Did you know?
 - In 2021, the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development recovered over \$700,000 in unpaid wages, and they generated over \$14.5 million by bringing employers into compliance.
 - Since January of 2021, Worker Justice Wisconsin has opened 82 construction worker cases, and has determined that these workers were owed over \$339,000 in stolen wages. All of these workers were Latinx.

- **Unsafe working conditions.** Construction has one of the [highest fatality rates](#) and the [highest rate of OSHA violations](#). Latinx immigrant workers are the [most likely to experience fatal injuries in the construction industry](#).
 - Did you know? Not accommodating for language barriers creates unsafe working conditions. During a series of listening sessions on workplace health and safety issues among Latinx immigrant workers this year, Prof. Lola Loustaunau of the UW School for Workers found that *IF* safety trainings were provided in Latinx immigrant’s workplaces - which was rare - they were done exclusively in English.

Latinx construction workers in Dane County experience misclassification, wage theft and unsafe working conditions at alarming rates. But they are also learning about their rights and standing up for themselves. In this video, hear from construction worker Marlon Velazquez, who came together with his co-workers to reclaim the \$22,000 they were owed. He talks about his experience of wage theft in the local construction industry, and demonstrates the power of worker solidarity to bring about justice:



3. Statements from faith leaders about Worker Justice

Use one or more of these quotes to stress the importance of solidarity between faith communities and workers struggling for justice.

Faith communities have within their capacity many powerful values, traditions, rituals, and narratives that are sorely needed during this time--stories of redemption, compassion, and justice. We need to leverage the best of these traditions, and wrestle with those toxic elements that support the status quo. And, I would add, faith communities cannot do it with their customary tools and approaches alone. They need to engage in fruitful, collaborative, and long-haul relationships with strategic social movement partners committed to the work of justice. One key group...is the labor movement.

– *Francisco Garcia, Jr., “Faith Needs Labor to Respond to this Moment,” “The Ugly Truth of a Pandemic and the Logic of Downturn” Interventions Forum, Vanderbilt Divinity School: Wendland-Cook Program in Religion and Justice, 21 May 2020.*

For all the major faith traditions, loving your neighbor as yourself is a core principle. Christian, Jews, Muslims, and others believe that the two highest religious values are to love God and love your neighbor. Worker centers [like Worker Justice Wisconsin] help put these values into practice. Almost every congregation is already involved in supporting a soup kitchen, a shelter, or sharing resources with poor people in their midst. Supporting a worker center is another form of ministry

– *Kim Bobo and Marien Casillas Pabellon, The Worker Center Handbook: A Practical Guide to Starting and Building the New Labor Movement (ILR Press: 2016), pg. 126.*

The laborer deserves his wages. I think wages of the people who do the work is an essential ingredient of justice and of community. I think the human species was created primarily to learn to work; physical work, intellectual work, artistic work, community work, social work. We have to work as human beings because it

feeds our dignity. It feeds our sense of making a contribution. It feeds our sense of taking care of ourselves. And so, 'All work has dignity to it,' is what Martin King said, 'All labor has dignity.' And so, work is not primarily for wages, but we ought to be able to benefit from our work, especially the work that we do outside of the home and in the larger community. They cannot support the simple right of the ordinary man and woman in this society to have the full dignity of their work and their wages.

– Rev. James Lawson in the documentary [trailer for “Love & Solidarity.”](#)

[L]et 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."

– Rabbi Bonnie Margulis, preaching at First Baptist Church of Madison, September 3, 2023, as part of *Labor in the Pulpits/On the Bimah/In the Minbar*.

A vocal critic of corporate greed, [Martin Luther King, Jr.] often highlighted how unchecked economic forces exploited workers, perpetuated inequality, and undermined the dignity of labor. The struggle for fair wages, just working conditions, and worker respect aligned with his vision for a more equitable society. Today, his arguments echo with poignant relevance as the quest for fair wages, equitable working conditions, and the acknowledgment of the inherent

dignity in all forms of work remains profoundly relevant in today's economy. King's steadfast opposition to corporations pursuing profit at the expense of their workers serves not only as a historical perspective but an urgent call to address systemic issues and advocate for economic structures that prioritize the well-being of workers, ensuring that the benefits of labor are justly distributed across society in the face of persistent challenges of structural injustice.

King's last public actions, in April 1968, were in support of striking Black sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee. The workers, who had been trying to unionize for years, were protesting unsafe conditions, abusive white supervisors, and low wages. King believed that the only way to win rights for every worker was for all workers to stand together in solidarity. As he famously said, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

– [Lulit Shewan, "Remembering Martin Luther King, Jr. as a Labor Leader and Champion of Working People in the Civil Rights Movement," The Center for Law and Social Policy.](#)



Los Volcanes Worker Collective, a textile cooperative being incubated at Worker Justice Wisconsin

4. How to get involved

Discuss local opportunities.

Get involved at Worker Justice Wisconsin, a worker center in Madison, WI that empowers nonunion, immigrant, and BIPOC workers to fight for just working conditions and an authentic voice in the workplace:

- [Make a donation](#), which is how we sustain all our programs!
- [Become a Worker Member and/or a Volunteer Worker Advocate](#)
- [Invite us to present a workshop in your congregation](#)
- [Join our newsletter](#) and [follow us on social media](#), and joining us during our [events and actions](#)!

Get involved with your local labor community by:

- Learning about the [South Central Federation of Labor](#)
- Attending [Labor Fest](#) on Sept 2, 12-5:30 pm
- Supporting your local unionized shops and worker cooperatives



5. Ending prayer

God reminds us that new ways of being are possible.

*Systems that reduce our dignity and exploit our labor have been remade before,
And they can be remade again.*

Help us to lift one another into that newness as we pray:

Help solidarity bloom around us, O God.

Use our hands and feet and our whole selves to the glory of your coming kin-dom.

Amen.

— Prayer adapted from Rev. Larissa Romero, Interim Pastor at Downtown Presbyterian Church, Nashville

WORKERJUSTICE.ORG

