"What's Outrageous? Poverty Wages!" The Role of Religious Leaders in Worker Justice by Joseph A. McCartin (Associate professor of history at Georgetown University)

"What's outrageous? Poverty wages!" This chant, echoed by thousands of striking fast food workers as they marched in the streets in New York, Chicago, and dozens of other cities on August 29, has begun to arouse the American conscience this Labour Day. The fast food industry produces billions in profits for corporations like McDonald's and Burger King. But, according to the organizers of the recent walkouts, fast food workers in New York City make only 25% of what they need to survive from their jobs. Fast food workers in other cities aren't much better off. In many ways, their struggle symbolizes the immorality of an economy that is producing jobs that keep workers poor. Who can argue with picket signs that say, "We can't survive on $7.25"?

It is not surprising that religious leaders have been conspicuously present on many of the fast food workers' picket lines. The recent protests have seen priests and ministers, rabbi and imams joining hands with fast food workers. The nation's largest labor-religious coalition, Interfaith Worker Justice, which is sponsoring Labour Day prayer services in cities across the country honouring the dignity of labour, has taken up their cause. So has Rev. Cheri Kroon, of the Flatbush Reform Church in Brooklyn. In April Rev. Kroon told the New York Times that her community was "filled with fast-food workers who have been suffering due to low wages, no sick days and unsafe working conditions."

The faith leaders now rallying to support fast food workers' demands for a living wage are reviving one of America's oldest and most powerful arguments for social justice, one deeply rooted in religious ideals. Many of those marching today for a fifteen-dollar wage for fast food workers might not realize that the very term "living wage" was first popularized by an American Roman Catholic priest, Monsignor John A. Ryan. In 1906 Fr. Ryan published a book called A Living Wage, which argued that workers deserved to earn enough to support themselves and their families in dignity. Over the next three decades, Ryan emerged as the nation's most forceful moral advocate for minimum wage. Many saw the passage of the federal minimum wage law in 1938 as a fulfilment of Ryan's long crusade.

But it was not just Ryan and Catholic co-religionists who helped elevate the ideal of a living wage in the United States. Two years after Ryan's book, the Methodist Episcopal Church adopted a "Social Creed" that endorsed the idea of "a living wage in every industry," and the nation's most prominent Jewish rabbi, Stephen Wise also took up this call.

Not only have religious leaders from across the spectrum consistently defended the living wage demand over the last century, activists from many faiths have spent much of the last decade laying the moral groundwork for the fight for justice that is now being waged by fast food workers.

The nation's first living wage ordinance passed in Baltimore in 1994. Soon fights for the living wage spread to many cities. It did not take long for religious communities to get involved. A decade ago many faiths began to go on record again in support of living wage demands. The Disciples of Christ adopted a resolution in 2005. In 2006, Dr. Muzammil Siddiqi, President of

the Fiqh Council of North America, issued a fatwa indicating that living wage demands were consistent with Islamic Shari'ah law.

In 2008 Rabbi Jill Jacobs authored a teshuvah (legal position) on the obligation to pay a living wage was passed by the Conservative Movement's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards, and that same year the Presbyterian Church's "Social Creed for the 21st Century" endorsed the living wage demand. Many other denominations followed suit.

Today, the living wage ideal has been broadly embraced by the nation's religions, and the Catholic Church, which helped introduce living wage demand in the early 20th century, seems poised to provide leadership on the issue again. "Not paying a just wage, not providing work, focusing exclusively on the balance books, on financial statements, only looking at making personal profit. That goes against God!" says Pope Francis, the world's most visible religious leader.

As workers take to the streets to fight for a living wage in fast food and other low paying industries, they can take comfort from knowing the nation's religions are increasingly aligned with their cause. That is one reason for hope this Labour Day that we might finally reverse the trend toward inequality that has so long afflicted us.

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A tale of two cities by Nick Cohen: Sunday 19 October 2003

In Canary Wharf, the rich world and the poor world gaze uncomprehendingly at one another

An under-appreciated cost of English being the global language is the loss of English jobs. It's difficult to imagine a call centre for German or Hungarian customers of a bank or telephone company being staffed by anyone other than Germans or Hungarians, but, when half the world speaks English, half the world can handle queries from England. The announcement from HSBC last week that 4,000 jobs would go from 'processing centres' in Sheffield, Birmingham, Brentwood and Swansea to India and Malaysia was shocking only because of the number of redundancies brought by what the Financial Times described as one of the largest one-off transfers of British jobs overseas.
But once the shock has passed, it seemed a routine business development. BT, Goldman Sachs, Abbey National and Prudential have already sent jobs East. Business pundits predict that 200,000 more may follow by 2008. As HSBC said, 'this is the best - indeed the only - way' of 'increasing productivity and allocating resources'. In Hyderabad and Bangalore, there are well-educated, English-speaking and, above all, cheap young workers who can take over the menial tasks of pricey young British workers. The vision of the best - indeed the only - way forward for Britain that is being presented is that the British concentrate on profitable specialist services, while basic clerical and IT work goes to India, manufacturing to China and farming to Africa. The global division of labour has its appeal until you realise that not everyone can be a merchant banker, and that the gulf between the poor world and the rich world doesn't run between countries but within them.

The head office of HSBC is in the Canary Wharf complex in the old London docklands. It's worth a visit, if you've never been. As you walk in from the slums of the East End, you realise that Britain is no longer two nations but two worlds. Canary Wharf is a gated work village. There are security guards round every corner and CCTV cameras on every wall. It's as isolated from the mainstream of the capital's life - Parliament, the courts, the West End - as it is from the poverty on the other side of the barricades. So, naturally, the Mirror, Telegraph and Independent decided that the complex was the best place in the country to house seven national newspapers.

When I was on the Independent, I hated working there. Short of putting reporters in prison, newspaper owners couldn't have found a more effective means of cutting them off from the public whose lives journalists are meant to cover. My reaction was eccentric. There's no doubt that most of the 55,000 workers enjoy being locked in the gleaming development. It is at once daring and safe; diverse and bland. The same shops you can find in any developed country are patronised by employees from the same banks you can find in any developed country.

Restaurants boast cuisines from all over the world; wine bars and gyms provide rest and recreation. HSBC, Citigroup, Credit Suisse First Boston and the other banks that joined the media in the towers take staff from all parts of the world. No one can fault the cultural variety on offer. But although you hear many languages, you can pass all of your day and much of your evening without meeting anyone from outside the professional middle class. It's as if a Serbian militia had rampaged through this corner of the East End and cleansed it of the impure poor.

The illusion lasts until 9 or 10 pm when the Third World meets the First. Cleaners shuffle in from the deck-access council flats from the London beyond the bomb-resistant glass. A minority are white and black British. Most are immigrants from Eastern Europe or West Africa, the men and women who service London's service industries throughout the night.

The best - indeed the only - way for the banks and newspapers to increase productivity and allocate resources in a competitive global market is for the banks and newspapers to keep them in drudgery. The logic of the market demands that they must get the lowest price possible. This is reached by putting cleaning contracts out to tender. The biggest cost for the cleaning companies is labour, therefore the sole way for them to win a contract is to keep wages and benefits down.

At HSBC's annual meeting in Canary Wharf on 30 May, an anomalous figure described the social consequences. Telco, an alliance of East End charities, had bought a few shares for Abdul Durrant, a cleaner employed by OCS, which has the contract to keep the bank clean. Most of his colleagues wouldn't dare speak in public for fear of losing their jobs. But Durrant is a brave man. He stood up, ignored the curious stares, and addressed Sir John Bond, the executive chairman of HSBC, and the other directors thus:

'Sir John Bond, distinguished ladies and gentlemen, my name is Abdul Durrant, I work in the same office as the board members, the only difference is I don't operate computers. My function is to operate a mop and bucket. Yes, I am one of the invisible night cleaners. You may be wondering what the hell is a night cleaner doing here: we're supposed to be invisible. Well, I am here on behalf of all the contract staff at HSBC and the families of East London. We receive £5 per hour - a whole £5 per hour! - no pension, and a measly sick pay scheme. In our struggles our children go to school without adequate lunch. We our unable to provide necessary books for their education. School outings in particular they miss out on. In the end, many of our children prefer a life of crime to being a cleaner... Sir John, we have met before. Will you consider your previous decision not to review the cleaning contract with OCS, so that I and my colleagues receive a living wage?'

Durrant, like most of the other cleaners, supplemented his income with work for another cleaning company once his night-shift had finished and working for a mini-cab firm at weekends. He didn't really have days off. The contrast between his circumstances and those of the HSBC directors on the stage was stark, to put it at its kindest. The bank had recently bought Household International, a loan company that lends to 'sub-prime' - or poor, as we used to say - customers at extortionate rates. William Aldinger, the head of Household International, was persuaded to join HSBC by a package of £23m over three years, and the promise of a hefty pay-off if he was fired for being useless.

Sir John lived more frugally on a salary of £1.88 million, and, as Durrant said, had at least had the decency to meet the contract cleaners, and the Telco workers and religious leaders who were trying to help them, at a run-down East End church. Everyone gave him credit for that, but the meeting remained a clash of two uncomprehending world views. Sir John was baffled by the accusations of rapacity. Wasn't his bank applauded in the voluntary sector for its strong sense of civic and social responsibility? Did it not contribute generously to many deserving causes and charities?

'Sir John,' interrupted Thomas McMahon, the Catholic Bishop of Brentwood, 'we don't want charity; we want justice.'

And that Sir John couldn't give. HSBC's profits were $6.88bn and, obviously, the company could afford to raise the cleaners' pay to the £6.50 an hour that Telco and the trade unions calculate is the minimum wage that Londoners need. But the 'world's local bank' could no more make a concession to the drudges who clean-up its mess than to the call centre staff in Swansea and Birmingham. In the interests of profit maximisation, it must seek the cheapest labour possible, whether in Bangalore or Bethnal Green. This was the board's sacred principle. To compromise it would be sacrilegious. If workers in Canary Wharf received privileged treatment, Sir John explained, HSBC workers all over the world would want it - and then where would we be?

How much money is needed to stop the poor being poor is a matter of heated debate, although you'd never guess it from the Canary Wharf press. The Rev Paul Nicolson, an extraordinary figure who could only be an Anglican vicar, has been trying to force Whitehall to accept that the minimum wage and tax credits don't begin to level mountainous inequality.

Nicolson is the actual Vicar of Dibley, in that the series was filmed in his church in the Buckinghamshire village of Turville. But instead of going on about whether his bum looked big in a cassock, Nicolson infuriated Chiltern Tories by refusing to pay the poll tax and organising holidays for deprived children. He then retired to the inner city and, with undiminished energy, organised a coalition of 65 charities, trade unions and churches to demand that everyone enjoys a civilised minimum income. The leaders met Tony Blair, and were pleased that the Prime Minister gave them a fair hearing.

Unfortunately, that is the total of their achievements to date. All they can do is gaze at the towers of Canary Wharf, where the windows never open, and the CCTV camera lenses never close, and reflect that the invisible workers who move in at night can't be given justice because of the shocking precedent it would set. Keeping them poor is 'the best - indeed the only - way'.

Nick Cohen – taken from:
http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2003/oct/19/socialexclusion.london