

## The American Workplace: Economic Policy, Moral Dimensions

By Thomas Shellabarger



American families face a changing workplace in a shifting economy. No doubt this fact is the cause of anxiety as we debate whether or not the economy is in recession. It probably will be one factor in how people vote this coming November. The impact of the economy on family life is a moral issue and a legitimate concern for voters.

Take the impact of growing unemployment. The U.S. Department of Labor reported that 62,000 jobs were lost just in the month of June, bringing the number of job losses to 438,000 for the first half of 2008. The unemployment rate appeared to remain steady at 5.5 percent, but many economists point out that is because many people have just stopped looking for work and are no longer counted in the unemployment rates. Meanwhile, Congress attempted to ease the pain by extending for additional 13 weeks unemployment insurance for workers who have exhausted the traditional 26 weeks of benefits. Unfortunately, the majority of American workers are not eligible to receive the complex Federal-State Unemployment Insurance benefits.

Whether the issue is unemployment or unpaid overtime, loss of benefits, corporate relocation, part-time work, contracting work, declining wages, international competition, limited training resources for laid-off workers or dwindling low-skill job opportunities—all these changes to local economies diminish the prospects of good jobs for U.S. workers. For too many people work puts added pressure on family life rather than strengthening it. Voters should ask candidates how their economic policies will enhance – rather than diminish – family life.

Work is the most significant way people directly interact with the economy. In *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, the bishops wrote “the economy must serve people, not the other way around. Work is more than a way to make a living; it is a form of continuing participation in God’s creation” (#52). Catholic social teaching points to the interconnection between family life and work. Work is the foundation, a necessary condition, for the formation of family life. The family shapes the social and ethical dimensions of human work. It is the starting point for establishing the conditions of the workplace.

Beginning in early 1970, family income, while still growing, started to favor those at the very top of the wage scale. Union membership began to level off. By the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century,

workers at the very top on the earnings scale consumed all of the economic growth and most other workers just held on or fell behind. This present disparity is the greatest wage divide since the Great Depression of the 1920s.

The Catholic Church recognizes the incredible busyness of family life and the demands of work that overwhelm families. Many pressing problems confronting family life are due to broad social forces, particularly economic strife. The decision of a man and woman to marry and raise a family is a significant one with many considerations involved. Yet today, without a job that pays a family wage, marriage and starting a family seem impossible.

To be sure, economic policies are complex and economic issues overlap. For example, employment policy affects housing. As of July 2008, the minimum wage is \$6.55 an hour or \$13,624 a year. For a family of two, the poverty line is \$13,167. For a parent and two children, the poverty line is \$16,079. The annual income needed to afford a national fair market rent for a studio apartment (zero-bedroom) is \$19,320 according to the National Low Income Housing Coalition publication *Out of Reach*; for a one-bedroom, \$22,360; for a two-bedroom \$26,520. The study concludes: “In no community in the U.S. today can someone who gets a fulltime job at the minimum wage reasonably expect to find a modest rental unit he or she can afford. While planned increases in the minimum wage over the next two years may put affordable housing closer within reach for some households, they will not close the gap between full-time earnings at the federal minimum wage and the income needed to afford prevailing rents in most markets.”

Catholic voters need to test the policies of government and candidates’ positions with Catholic principles of Catholic teaching. The bishops urge Catholic voters to focus not on political questions such as “Are you better off than you were two or four years ago?” Rather, each of us should enter the voting booth focusing on the ethical and moral dimensions of public policies that affect the entire community.

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Thomas Shellabarger is the Policy Advisor for Urban and Economic Issues in the Department of Justice, Peace, and Human Development at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.