



Helping People Help Themselves



breaking the cycle of poverty for over 40 years

Catholic Campaign for Human Development
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FE Y JUSTICIA WORKER CENTER

BY BETH GRIFFIN

Payday is not typically a dangerous occasion, but construction worker Oscar Suazo had a hair-raising experience one payday in Houston, Texas. When Oscar approached his employer in an effort to recover \$2,000 in back wages, the contractor threatened Oscar and his co-workers at gunpoint. His employer has still not paid Oscar for the work he performed, despite a court ruling in Oscar's favor.

Regrettably, low-wage workers routinely encounter wage theft, discrimination, and safety risks. They rarely speak out for fear of losing the \$7.25 per hour jobs that feed their families. A recent national survey found that two-thirds of low-wage workers experience at least one pay-related violation each week.

Since 2006, Fe y Justicia Worker Center (FJWC) has helped men and women in Houston recover wages,



Photo courtesy of Fe y Justicia Worker Center.

understand their rights, and advocate for better working conditions. The Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) provides grant support to FJWC.

Laura Perez-Boston, executive director of FJWC, says the organization's membership includes more than 750 domestic workers, construction laborers, restaurant employees, and low-wage service industry workers. Texas workers are particularly vulnerable, she says, because state labor laws do not require employers to provide rest breaks or sick days or to carry workers' compensation insurance. A large percentage of the population works in low-paying jobs with no benefits. "Texas has the highest death rate in the country for people working on construction jobs," Laura adds.

The most pervasive injustice is wage theft, which Laura describes as an issue that is both simple and complex.

"Wage theft occurs any time a worker is not paid for the hours worked," she says. But it's not always easy to spot. In construction, for example, a worker may get a consistently short check over a long period of time, or day laborers transported from a central area to a job site might not be paid for the travel time or may be stranded at a remote location.



Photo courtesy of Fe y Justicia Worker Center.

Restaurant workers earning \$2.13 per hour might not see their tips, or domestic workers might not be paid for work required outside the agreed-upon tasks. Other hourly employees might be expected to come to work early and stay late without overtime pay.

Wage theft plays into a vicious cycle that jeopardizes families. "People can't pay the rent, because they're not fully paid. They face eviction. Parents can't provide for the family's needs, and the children see the parents treated with disrespect," Laura says.

FJWC was created in 2006 after community and faith leaders and local immigrant activists identified a gap in addressing the mounting workers' rights issues brought to traditional venues. Laura says, "Workers called union halls when they were fired for

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From the Director

Dear Friends,

“An honest day’s work for an honest day’s pay” is ingrained in us. Like the laborers in the scriptural vineyard, we expect to be paid the agreed-on wage. So we feel righteous indignation when we hear about someone denied payment after a long workday or week. Sometimes, it’s the result of a benign mistake. But more often, it’s a deliberate move by an unscrupulous employer who is unlikely to be held accountable. Wage theft wears many disguises but always preys on low-wage workers who fear losing their jobs if they complain or who don’t know how to assert their rights in the most effective forum.

In this issue, you’ll read about Fe y Justicia Worker Center (FJWC) in Houston, a CCHD-funded organization that helps workers stand up for their rights, including just wages and safe working conditions. I have been impressed with the dedication of the leaders and the members of this small but growing organization. While working to right individual wrongs, they have helped low-wage workers recover more than \$1.6 million in unpaid wages. They have established a broad-based coalition throughout the larger community. But FJWC is also looking out for future workers by developing leadership and promoting legislation that will help in years to come. This is tremendously unselfish and forward-thinking work on their part.

FJWC offers an inspiring example of Catholic social teaching in action. The organization is helping workers acquire and master the tools they need to address the injustices they suffer. The group celebrates the deep human dignity of all people, who are made in the image of God.

FJWC has received archdiocesan and national CCHD funding. Deacon Sam Dunning, the CCHD director for the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston, says, “We were among the first to help fund Fe y Justicia, and from the beginning we’ve had a fruitful collaboration. Cardinal Daniel DiNardo understands, appreciates, and fully supports it.”

On the national level, we honored Fe y Justicia with our annual Sister Margaret Cafferty Development of Peoples Award for bold action on behalf of justice. You can read about the history of the award and the life of Sr. Margaret Cafferty in this issue.

I hope your summer provides opportunities for rest and reflection. Please devote some thought and prayer to those who struggle for justice and human dignity throughout the year.

Gratefully,

Ralph McCloud
Director, Catholic Campaign for Human Development

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Photo courtesy of Fe y Justicia Worker Center.

demanding pay. Women’s centers had reports of sexual harassment on the job, and people came to churches seeking financial assistance as a result of wage theft or retaliation firings. It was a watershed of different issues beyond the capacity and outside the mission of these groups.”

“Our goal as an organization is to empower workers and not do for them,” Laura says. This includes requiring members to come to the office for “Know Your Rights” trainings and helping workers reach out to identify and organize their neighbors who face similar conditions.

“Many times people want to create change for themselves and their community but don’t have the support they need to make it happen,” she says.

FJWC also helps workers recover wages and prevent eviction. “We saw a culture of impunity, where employers felt emboldened and untouchable by the lack of consequences,” Laura says. FJWC’s persistent work with local officials helped to win the passage of Houston’s first anti-wage theft ordinance in November 2013.

It will be a challenge to help workers understand the new law and use it to

hold the city accountable for the legislation it passed, Laura says. She predicts families will be strengthened when children watch their parents stand up for their own dignity and for the “things worth fighting for.”

The group initially began with guidance from the national Interfaith Worker Justice organization in Chicago and local grant funding from CCHD.

Deacon Sam Dunning, CCHD director for the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston, says, “I’m really proud of the affiliation that the archdiocese and CCHD have with FJWC. They’ve done a yeoman’s job and become a leading voice for the rights of workers and the dignity of the person.”

He describes the group as “a nerve center” and grassroots effort that radiates out to the community. Through its assertive and positive interactions with businesses, government, and faith leaders, the group addresses issues on a systemic level rather than project-by-project, Deacon Dunning says. “They’ve developed a broad-based coalition to highlight the plight of workers to a large audience.”

The group provides an important tool for local parishes. “When a

parishioner goes to them to report shorted wages, a job site injury, or an instance of justice denied, parish staff has a resource to send them to—Fe y Justicia,” the deacon explains.

The organization appeals to diverse donors looking for a concrete expression of Catholic social teaching. Deacon Dunning says everyone can relate to a story of a person denied pay for an honest day’s work.

CCHD recognized FJWC for demonstrating outstanding witness to gospel values with its 2014 Sister Margaret Cafferty Development of Peoples Award. The award event, held in February during the Catholic Social Ministry Gathering, honored the group’s exemplary commitment to defending worker rights and empowering workers.

FJWC has become a key player in an international coalition that builds partnerships with government, religious, and community groups to identify and address workplace abuse. The story of FJWC’s work serves as an outstanding example of how CCHD grants help to break the cycle of poverty.



Photo courtesy of Fe y Justicia Worker Center.



Photo courtesy of Fe y Justicia Worker Center.

DEVELOPMENT OF PEOPLES AWARD

Each year, the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) honors the memory of Sr. Margaret Cafferty by conferring its Development of Peoples Award. The award was established to mark Sr. Margaret's many accomplishments, her unrelenting compassion, and a lifetime of dedication to the cause of those on the margins. By the time of her death in 1997, she had devoted nearly 45 years to service as a religious with the Sisters of the Presentation.

Sr. Margaret was the daughter of parents engaged in the struggle for laborers' rights. Her father was a coal miner, and her mother grew up in a boarding house for lead miners. Sr. Margaret began her ministry as a high school teacher in San Francisco and Los Angeles, where, from the beginning, she strove to open the eyes of her students to injustice and the needs of those in their community. She practiced a life of solidarity in the parishes where she lived and worked, dedicating herself to the struggles of the people she encountered.

As a pastoral minister, Sr. Margaret worked with African American communities in San Francisco in their daily battles against poverty. She met the laborers of the United Farm Workers and stood with them in their fight for dignity. When many looked away, she worked to aid refugees fleeing the wars in Central America and led her order's participation in the Sanctuary Movement, which developed a network of parishes and congregations to assist those escaping violence.

In addition to her work directly assisting and empowering those on the margins, Sr. Margaret also provided leadership and guidance. She held a variety of leadership roles and worked to promote the development of women leaders in the Church and in society. She was elected superior general of the Presentation Sisters, served as executive director of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, and was a key advisor to the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. As executive director of the Catholic Conference on Urban Ministry, she supported local maintenance workers fighting for higher wages from Notre Dame University.

Wherever she served, Sr. Margaret worked instinctively to correct injustice. Her life was filled with acts of mercy and compassion that showed the intensity of her devotion to Christ hidden in the poor and marginalized. Her persevering work demonstrated that the opposite of poverty isn't affluence but justice.

The annual Development of Peoples Award recognizes the achievements of CCHD groups around the country in gaining justice for the oppressed. Through this award, CCHD remembers the cloud of witnesses who precede us in our work of mercy and compassion, especially Sr. Margaret Cafferty.

Do you know a group or individual that should be nominated for CCHD's Development of Peoples Award? Let us know at cchdgrants@usccb.org!

What Is CCHD?

Through the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), Catholics and friends of CCHD across the country help poor and low-income Americans to help themselves and their communities out of poverty.

Since 1970, the Catholic Campaign has contributed over \$280 million to more than 7,800 low-income-led,

community-based projects that strengthen families, create jobs, build affordable housing, fight crime, and improve schools and neighborhoods. CCHD requires that projects develop community leadership and participation so that their solutions to poverty will be long-lasting and effective, and so that CCHD's investment in people will help break the cycle of poverty. CCHD also educates Catholics about the causes of poverty and seeks to build solidarity between impoverished and affluent persons.



An initiative of the
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Today, 46.2 million people in America are living below the poverty line.

That's more than ever before—and far more than the population of our largest state. Join us and help to break the cycle of poverty.



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