

2ndOpinion

READER'S VIEW POVERTY

We must demand justice for America's low-wage workers

BY WILL RAINFORD

In today's economy, families are struggling to make ends meet more than at any time in the last three



decades. The cost of gas, food, housing and medical care has risen far apace of wages. Not surprisingly, poverty in Idaho is growing. More tellingly, the misery index (rate of inflation and unemployment rate combined) is higher than it has been since the economic crisis of the late 1970s. It should come as no surprise that low-income to middle-income families are the ones who bear the strain of a downturned economy.

It is appropriate in this dour econo-

my to ask anew, what causes poverty and how might we, as a community, help those struggling to make ends meet? The simple answer to the causation question is society's need for cheap goods and services delivered by low-wage workers who do not have medical benefits.

Proof of this theory resides in the unemployment rate, which in Idaho hovers around 4 percent. If 96 percent of our state's working aged adults are employed and, yet, nearly two-thirds of our families do not earn living wages, one can only look to the wage index as the source of poverty.

If poverty exists because of low-wage work, I see one of four possible responses by our community. The first

possibility is to admit that we consumers own responsibility for the people who toil and labor in the manufacturing and delivery of our goods and services. In this responsibility, we need to pay reasonable prices so that labor might earn a living wage and decent benefits.

The second possibility, directly related to the first, is to recognize that employers owe their employees a living wage and benefits. If employers will not pay, government needs to enforce corporate responsibility.

This takes us to the third possibility for solving poverty. Consumers want their cheap goods and are unwilling to pay higher prices. Therefore, government needs to make up the difference between what an employee

makes and what she or he needs to provide for the family. Of course, this means that consumers still pay, through taxes instead of higher-priced goods.

The fourth possibility is to simply continue with "business as usual," while more and more hard-working American families fall into the cycle of poverty.

In a recent address to the world, Pope Benedict XVI lamented the sin of materialism, noting that the cost of continued overconsumption is deepening misery, not merely for the person in poverty, but for the consumer addicted to purchasing unnecessary stuff. Rather than perpetuating a culture of materialism and overconsumption, we should turn our eyes

to our brothers and sisters struggling to make ends meet.

We need to demand of each other, our corporations and our government living wages and health benefits for low-wage workers. If we seek a just world, if we dream of a democratic society, if we look to a future of social stability, we need to end poverty today.

Catholic Charities of Idaho, joining with Catholic Charities USA, is seeking to cut poverty in half by the year 2020. Please join us in this effort. Call (208) 890-0448 if you wish to find out how to become involved in our campaign.

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