

# working notes

*facts and analysis of social  
and economic issues*

## Exploring a Just Wage

From a Just Hope to a Just Wage Economy

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Raising the Social Wage

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Just Transition and Representation of  
Farming in Ireland

The Human Right to a Just Wage in  
a Global and European Perspective

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“Sewing” Justice: A Theological  
Response to Garment Worker  
Exploitation



### **Working Notes**

Facts and analysis of social and economic issues  
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# Editorial

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Kevin Hargaden

The Just Wage Initiative is an interdisciplinary project based in Notre Dame University's Center for Social Concerns. Working since 2017, and deeply rooted in the Catholic Social Teaching tradition, this initiative has established seven basic criteria which must be met to ensure a given wage is just.

Developed between academics, employers, employees, and other stakeholders, its initial use has proven promising in industrial negotiations. Workers appreciate how the conversation is geared towards something more than the bottom-line, without losing sight of the importance of the bottom-line in an age of inflation and increasing difficulties for many to make ends meet. Employers appreciate how the conversation is framed around a dialogue, a back-and-forth that can transform working culture. More is on offer in such conversations that trying to control rising wage costs. As one of the architects of the scheme reported to me, "At base, employers want to go to sleep at night knowing they are good people and this framework speaks to their better angels."

I became aware of the Just Wage initiative when I travelled in 2022 to Dhaka in Bangladesh, to explore what relevance it might play in that labour context. I asked one young garment worker what message she would have me deliver to students I teach or congregations to which I preach, from the floors of the giant sweatshops

that surround the city. "Tell them," she said, "that my blood is on their clothes." Construing good work simply in terms of pay clearly falls short in the context of such devastating injustice.

This issue of *Working Notes* seeks to explore the utility of the Just Wage tool and "just wage" as a concept for contemporary Ireland. We begin with a paper by Prof. Dan Graff and Prof. Clemens Sedmak, who have been leaders in the project from the beginning. Prof. Graff is a labour historian and Prof. Sedmak is a social ethicist. Together they chart a path from "A Just Hope to a Just Wage Economy". Starting the issue with this essay is appropriate since Graff and Sedmak see their work as "a conversation starter, not a conversation stopper", reminding us that "the idea of a just wage cannot be separated from questions of a decent life and human dignity."

There is an opportunity in an Irish context, considering the particularities of our economy and the lingering memory of social democracy, to supplement conversations about a just wage with what we might call the "social wage". In "Raising the Social Wage", Dr Laura Bambrick of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions looks at how increasing the provision and quality of services attains much of what is hoped for in a just wage, with perhaps greater coverage and inclusivity.

Patrick Brereton, Professor emeritus at DCU in the Communications Department, is well known in Irish environmental circles for his work on how

we can construe the climate and biodiversity crisis in our context. In his creative essay, “Just Transition and Representation Of Farming In Ireland”, he considers filmic depictions of Irish rural life to think about how agriculture must change. The reader is introduced to zombie movies and horror films they may never have heard of before. They are, however, left in no doubt that the race to the bottom of price that leaves farmers overworked, under a burden of debt, and at the mercy of supermarket conglomerates is not sustainable. Whatever a “just wage” framework might look like in the Irish countryside, it cannot be more of the same industrial agriculture.

Is this framework just a good idea on paper or is it really practical as a response in the real world? Andreas Müller, Professor of Law at Basel University, considers in his essay “The human right to a just wage in a global and European perspective”. With remarkable attention to detail, he maps out for the reader the intricate web of charters, protocols, and binding commitments in which talk of “Just Wages” can sit. He sketches the hope that lies behind new laws like the EU Commissions Due Diligence directive, but cautions that such initiatives (a similar law is in process within the Dáil) “takes litigation away from where the damage occurred in value chains and transfers it to courts in the Global North, thus “delocalizing” justice”.

In the final paper, Céire Kealty, a PhD student in Theology who is just about to finish up at Villanova University, shares her research under the title: “‘Sewing’ Justice: A Theological Response to Garment Worker Exploitation.” It is fitting that Theology and ethics gets the last word in this issue since at base the problem of wages is the problem of recognising the dignity in the other. “What do we owe each other?” is the question that drives all our social, political, and economic action and Ms. Kealty demonstrates that Catholic Social thought has meaningful contributions to inform our answer, especially in the context of the exploitation of garment workers - not just in Bangladesh but in Los Angeles or Leicester as well.

Catholic Social Teaching has, from the beginning, been concerned with the idea of a just wage. The modern tradition is dated from Pope Leo XIII’s publication of *Rerum Novarum* in 1891. There we find that the Christian cannot be content with a society which has installed the floor of a minimum wage. This is where much of our political thinking presently rests. It is not even enough for us to establish a subsistence wage that would guarantee basic needs are met. This would be considered a reach in many contemporary policy conversations. More than a century ago, the Pope was clear that what was needed was a just wage that would allow a worker to live a good and dignified life.

To pay a worker less than is just, the Pontiff asserts, is to commit fraud and this is a “great crime which cries to the avenging anger of Heaven.”<sup>1</sup> Even the most strident trade unionist in the English-speaking world today would struggle to match the force of this rhetoric. A person should end up with enough money at the end of a week’s work to respect their dignity, support their basic needs, and allow them to support others.

It is striking that the Pope’s perspective from the 1890s would be a radical position today. Our context is clearly one that needs a new way to talk about justice in work, to counteract the growing inequality and insecurity that marks our economies. In some settings, it might be important to emphasise that making work better for people - not just materially but as a lived experience - is one of the best available ways to undercut the populist turn that threatens our present political arrangements. But we worry that instrumentalising the conversation in that way misses the basic point that Catholic Social Teaching has held front and central for more than a century: The person you pay is not just your worker, but is your neighbour. They are worth more than just what they can do for you. And the pay they receive is not just how they make ends meet, it is a medium through which all of society is sustained. To seek justice there is the beginning of the fight to achieve justice anywhere.

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1 Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum* (Vatican City: Vatican, 1891), §20.

# From a Just Hope to a Just Wage Economy

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Daniel Graff and Clemens Sedmak

Prof. Dan Graff is professor of practice in the Department of History and director of the Higgins Labor Program of the Center for Social Concerns at University of Notre Dame. He is the recipient of Notre Dame's 2023 Rev. William A. Toohey, C.S.C., Award for Social Justice and won a first place in Best Reporting of Social Justice Issues from the 2023 Catholic Press Awards (USA).

Prof. Clemens Sedmak is a professor of social ethics at the Keough School of Global Affairs and serves as director of the Nanovic Institute for European Studies, University of Notre Dame. He is interested in Catholic Social Tradition, his most recent books: *Enacting Integral Human Development* (2023), *Enacting Catholic Social Tradition* (2022).



UAW Strike, 2023. Credit: Creative Commons License, photo by Adam Schultz (<https://www.flickr.com/photos/bidenforpresident/48788298262>)

## THE WIDESPREAD WAGE PROBLEM

As we write, the United Automobile Workers (UAW) are in the midst of an unprecedented simultaneous strike of “the Big Three” American automakers: General Motors, Ford, and Stellantis. The list of pent-up frustrations leading to this walkout is long, involving everything from pay to pensions, plant closings, job protections, two-tiered hiring, the length of the work week, and the transition from gas to electric vehicles. Despite the complexity and contentiousness of the issues driving the conflict, much of the mainstream media’s coverage, focuses exclusively on the question of hourly wages. Our local newspaper, for example, the *South Bend [Indiana] Tribune*, reduced the dispute to a catalogue of competing “wage and benefit offers” and counteroffers, nothing but dollars and cents and percentages.<sup>1</sup>

Such constricted coverage of labour conflict is commonplace in the United States, where short-term analysis of macroeconomic trends

<sup>1</sup> Michelle Chapman and Tom Krisher, “UAW rejects wage offers from Detroit automakers,” *South Bend Tribune*, Sep. 10, 2023, A14.

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Proposals inviting a broader consideration of the policies and relationships that fundamentally shape our lives and prospects get characterised as unrealistic and irresponsible threats to the ‘natural order’ of things.

involving the gross domestic product, stock prices, and interest and unemployment rates dominates economic discussion. This focus on numbers above all else not only narrows the scope of economic debate but also normalises the assumptions and aspirations of what could be called ‘the neoliberal project’, presenting weakened workers, rampant inequality, and persistent poverty as ordinary, even necessary outcomes.<sup>2</sup> In such a context, proposals inviting a broader consideration of the policies and relationships that fundamentally shape our lives and prospects get characterised as unrealistic and irresponsible threats to the

<sup>2</sup> For a brief introduction to the history and politics of neoliberalism, see Manfred B. Steger and Ravi K. Roy, *Neoliberalism: A Very Short Introduction*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 2021). For a recent debate amongst US historians on whether neoliberalism is dead, see Gary Gerstle, Amy C. Offner, and Julia Ott, “Is It Over?,” *Dissent* (Fall 2023), 17-26.

‘natural order’ of things. In the case of the current UAW strike, even the union’s ostensible allies warn against proffering an “overly ambitious list of demands” rather than being “careful about killing the goose that lays the golden egg.”<sup>3</sup>

Though this is not the venue to vet the merits of the UAW’s “audacious” proposals (or the Big Three’s counters), it certainly takes no audacity to suggest that most working people (in the USA or elsewhere) would not characterise the economy of the past several decades as anything resembling “a golden egg.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed, economic inequality is one of the most pressing issues of our time. At all levels – from individual households to titanic corporations, both within the United States and beyond via the global supply chains connecting us – problems of pay demand our attention, intersecting related struggles for inclusion and equality. Persistent gender wage gaps, stubborn disparities in unemployment rates by race, and widening gulfs between the salaries of executives and everyone else – all these point to fundamental labour problems requiring redress.<sup>5</sup> From Baltimore to Bangladesh, far too many people struggle with making ends meet on a weekly basis. Living hand to mouth, too many households must rely on multiple wage earners (sometimes working multiple jobs), and even those who do get by are only one work accident, job loss, or family illness removed from economic disaster.<sup>6</sup> In short, too

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From Baltimore to Bangladesh, far too many people struggle with making ends meet on a weekly basis. Living hand to mouth, too many households must rely on multiple wage earners (sometimes working multiple jobs), and even those who do get by are only one work accident, job loss, or family illness removed from economic disaster.

many of the world’s people are compelled to participate in what we might call a “just hope” economy, where they literally must hope (and pray) that they and their loved ones will avoid a variety of worst-case scenarios each working day.

## THINKING ABOUT WAGE JUSTICE

This is the state of affairs that led us to form an interdisciplinary working group of colleagues at the University of Notre Dame, guided by a core question: *What makes any given wage just or unjust?* Searching for a common vocabulary to facilitate conversations amongst those unused to communicating beyond their own academic disciplines, we turned to Catholic Social Teaching (CST), whose long, rich tradition emphasises the dignity of those who work for others, the rights of all to participate in economic decisions, and a commitment to the common good. In fact, ever since the first social encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*, published by Pope Leo XIII in 1891, the question of just wages has been a central question in the social ethics of the Church.<sup>7</sup> As Pope John Paul II reaffirmed in his 1981 social encyclical *Laborem Exercens*, “there is no more important way for securing a just relationship between the worker and the employer than that constituted by remuneration for work.” But he went further than that, arguing that “a just wage is the

3 Steven Rattner, “The United Auto Workers Is Overplaying Its Hand, Risking Our Economy and the Election,” *New York Times*, Sep 20, 2023. Rattner, who headed President Barack Obama’s automobile task force during the Great Recession and pushed the UAW to grant significant concessions in 2009 negotiations with the government-restructured and bailed-out GM and Chrysler, admits that autoworkers are worthy of significant wage increases, but he argues that “they are asking for too much.”

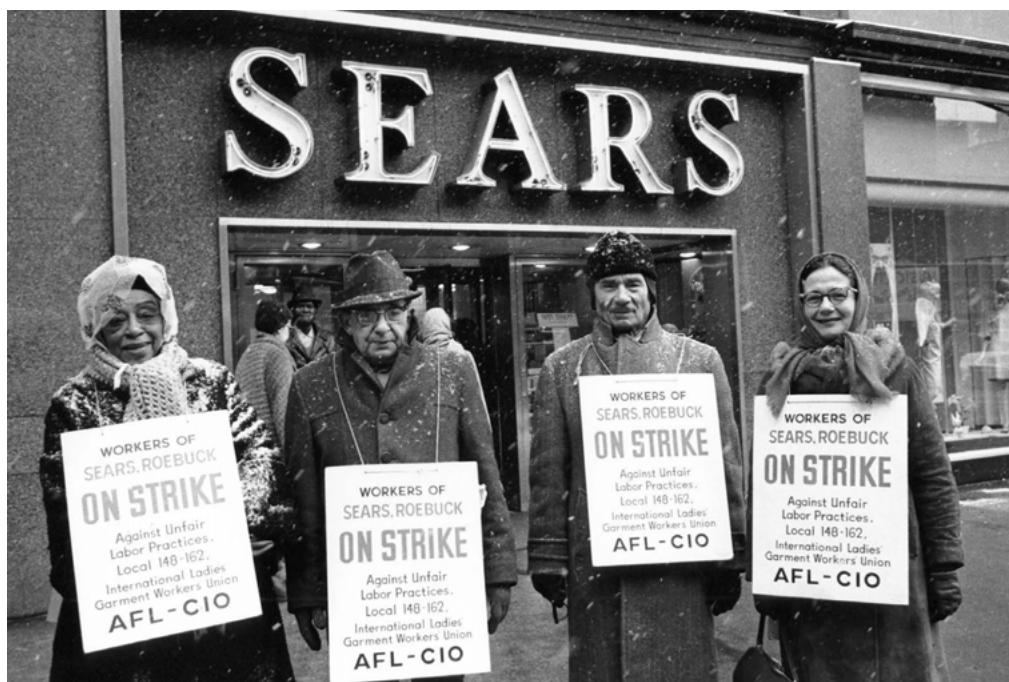
4 UAW president Sean Fain himself has characterised the union’s contract demands as “audacious,” perhaps intending his members and the wider public to wonder why matters such as higher wages, equal pay across the board, shorter work weeks, greater job security, and protection from the threat of technological displacement should be seen as so outlandish. See Tom Krisher and the Associated Press, “Combative new UAW president’s ‘audacious’ contract demands to Ford, GM and Stellantis include a 46% pay rise and a 32-hour workweek,” *Fortune*, Sep. 4, 2023.

5 For elaboration on these themes, see “The Just Wage Forum 2021,” a series of video conversations featuring scholars and practitioners, in particular the “Just Wage Forum Opening Session: Promoting a Just Wage Economy,” featuring historian Dan Graff, social ethicist Clemens Sedmak, management professor Charlice Stabile, and economist Donald Stabile, *Just Wage Initiative at the University of Notre Dame’s Center for Social Concerns*, Feb. 12, 2021.

6 A detailed and telling case study of this dynamic of (the unequal distribution of) vulnerability has been published by British poverty researcher David Hulme, who followed one particular family in Bangladesh over a long period of time; because of illness and injustice the household fell from a status of being “occasionally poor” into chronic poverty. See David Hulme, “Thinking ‘Small’ and the Understanding of Poverty: Maymana and Mofizul’s Story,” *IDPM Working Paper 22* (2003); David Hulme and Karen Moore, “Thinking Small and Thinking Big about Poverty: Maymana and Mofizul’s Story Updated,” *The Bangladesh Development Studies*, 33.3 (2010), 69–96.

7 Leo XIII was very clear in his language and message: “To defraud any one of wages that are his due is a great crime.” *Rerum Novarum* (1891), §20. A note about gender: Earlier CST statements in particular used as default the male pronoun, expressing a conventional (if modern) understanding of ideal households populated by male breadwinners, female homemakers, and their children. While more recent pronouncements reveal a greater commitment to gender equality at work, an enduring preference for the breadwinner model of one wage-earning parent and one (unwaged) home caring parent suggests unresolved questions confronting not only CST but all advocates for a just economy, especially amidst a social reality where two (or more) adult incomes are increasingly common.





Sears Roebuck employees on strike against unfair labor practices, March 15, 1967. Credit: Wikimedia Commons

concrete means of *verifying the justice* of the whole socioeconomic system.”<sup>8</sup> Informed by these moral tenets of CST, and drawing together scholars and students from history, theology, business, law, sociology, economics, and other disciplines, we formed the Just Wage Initiative to probe this question of a just wage.

We started our discussions with simple questions and exercises. Do you know a person who is overpaid? If so, why would you say that? Think of the professional hierarchy an organisation such as a hospital: if the chief surgeon makes the equivalent of a 100, how much should justly be paid to a receptionist, a cook, a custodian, a doctor in residence, a nurse, a business manager, support staff?<sup>9</sup> How much money do you think you need to live a decent life in your home town? We also analysed interviews with twenty custodians that a research team at the University of Salzburg conducted in Austria; these interviews pointed to workers’ concerns

8 John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens* (1981), §19, emphasis added.

9 It may be useful to give an example of how this works out. Let’s imagine a situation where the chief surgeon makes “100” and that equals €250,000. If we judge that the salary of the nurse should be “66” and that the cook is worth “25”, then their respective “just-wage” salaries would be in the range of €165,000 and €62,500 each. It is fair to say that the Irish Health Service does not remunerate nurses and cooks in such a fashion.

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with lack of recognition (including respect, reputation, and remuneration), powerlessness, stress and anxiety due to dense control patterns, and, more generally, the sometimes humiliating experience of invisibility.<sup>10</sup>

Insights gleaned from these discussions prompted some initial ambivalence on the question of a “just wage.” Just a wage, we thought? Clearly it takes much more to construct a fair and dignified employment relationship than merely an adequate level of remuneration. Even a high wage will not automatically constitute what Randy Hodson has described as “workplace dignity,” defined as “the ability to establish a sense of self-worth and self-respect and to appreciate the respect

10 Cf. Clemens Sedmak, *Anstaendige Institutionen* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2024), Chapter 8.

of others.”<sup>11</sup> Clearly, we thought our concept of a just wage must be informed by recognition that the lack of one would not only reveal a workplace vulnerable to undignified conditions, but also make the entire life of a person and household at risk of not finding conditions of decent living.

## THE JUST WAGE INITIATIVE

The deeper research into Catholic social thought and the interdisciplinary discussions on contemporary economic and workplace issues led to the creation of the Just Wage Framework,<sup>12</sup> an online tool designed to raise awareness, encourage discernment, and foster dialogue amongst diverse stakeholders in the search for a more just economy. Foregrounding the human elements and moral issues inherent in the core labour and economic relationships giving shape to our lives, this tool aims to move us beyond the narrow number crunching that often poses as informed analysis even as it sidesteps inconvenient ethical dilemmas and blind spots.

Our Just Wage Framework consists of seven intersecting criteria which together promote a fairer and more inclusive workplace and economy, where a just wage:

1. Enables a decent life for the worker and the worker’s household;
2. Facilitates asset building;
3. Features social security to mitigate the risks accompanying unemployment, injury, and old age;
4. Non-discriminatory and promotes inclusion;
5. Not excessive;
6. Reflects participation by workers;
7. Recognises qualification, performance, and type of work.

Visualised as a honeycomb of hexagons (see Figure 1 below), the Just Wage Framework offers a novel approach to the problem of pay that goes beyond dollars and cents. Instead of focusing solely on numbers, the Just Wage Framework features a holistic and qualitative

**7 CST- Rooted Criteria that Compose a Just Wage:**

1. Wage enables a decent life for workers and households.
2. Wage enables asset-building
3. Wage offers basic social security to workers and households.
4. Wage structure is non-discriminatory.
5. Wage is not excessive
6. Wage structure reflects participation by Workers
7. Wage considers performance, qualification and type of work.



**Figure 1:** Seven CST-rooted Criteria that Compose a just Wage

<sup>11</sup> Randy Hodson, *Dignity at Work* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2001), 3.

<sup>12</sup> Center for Social Concerns, “Just Wage Initiative,” accessed 22 January 2024, <https://socialconcerns.nd.edu/justwagetool>.

representation of the employment relationship that takes into account money, to be sure, but also so much more. For each of these criteria we provide a textual basis from CST documents; in addition, each criterion features indicators for the user to measure her answer against our priorities, as well as resources to learn more.

## THE BENEFITS OF A JUST WAGE FRAMEWORK

Let us finally identify five reasons why we think our approach is useful in the struggle for a fairer and more just economy. First, the Just Wage Framework emphasises the interconnectedness of the seven criteria, arguing that they are all important, integrating with each other, and collaborating to promote justice at work. The criteria are connected but not ranked, because no one criterion is more foundational than another. In order to appreciate the complexity of the wage relationship, it is more important to see the links connecting, rather than the lines separating, the criteria.

Second, the Just Wage Framework is holistic and qualitative in the name of promoting discernment and dialogue; it does not produce a particular dollar figure or point total for arguing over, one that might alienate users before they even take the time to think about the issues. In addition, by rejecting that a just wage might be easily measured via a numerical value, our Just Wage Framework challenges the narrow number-driven approach that governs so much of our dialogue and decision-making on economic and labour matters. Instead, we aim to invite stakeholder reflection, encourage further research, and facilitate dialogue that will hopefully lead to action.

Third, a Just Wage, as we see it, is more complex and robust than a minimum wage or even a living wage – any wage definition that focuses solely on dollars per hour. You simply cannot capture the justness of a wage scenario solely in terms of money, because things like health, stress, time off, and a voice at work matter just as much. The Just Wage Framework is certainly not oppositional to tools such as MIT’s Living Wage Calculator,<sup>13</sup> which links zip codes to

cost of living to produce the income required to survive across the US. Our approach aims to build from that by expanding and deepening the wage conversation. That includes thinking not only about floors, but also about ceilings, which is why criterion five – a just wage is not excessive – has generated perhaps the most interest and opposition in our presentations and consultations with diverse stakeholders. Too often, the focus of public debate is on minimums and ignore maximums; in reality, the minimums are a problem because of unjust maximums.

Fourth, our just wage tool is designed for use by multiple stakeholders, which is why it is relatively straightforward and worded to accommodate different approaches. We hope that an entrepreneur thinking about hiring will use it, that a labour or community leader developing a campaign will deploy it, and that a political candidate or elected official will exploit it to help develop new legislation. Further, when we say multiple stakeholders, we mean Catholic and non-Catholic alike. We began with CST because we are at a Catholic institution, housed at an institute whose mission is to engage CST. But the principles of CST related to work and the economy are neither unique nor unfamiliar to those from other faiths or secular traditions. The dignity of work, the integral irreducible importance of every person, the right to participate in community decision-making, and the right to a share in the fruits of our collective labour. These are all common – even common sense – notions that too often get dropped in economic matters. The point is to employ a moral lens to reframe foundational questions in order to generate more productive answers in the cause of a more just economy.

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<sup>13</sup> Massachusetts Institute of Technology, “Living Wage Calculator,” accessed 22 January 2024, <https://livingwage.mit.edu/>



*Credit: With permission from Christophe Meneboeuf: [www.xtof.photo](http://www.xtof.photo)*

Fifth, a just wage is the fruit of multiple stakeholder dialogue sessions and negotiations, and therefore a just wage will vary from place to place, depending on the concrete context giving it shape. Furthermore, a just wage cannot be imposed by an employer on workers, and it cannot be produced by government policy alone. Both employers and government are crucial voices in the construction of a just wage, but so too are workers, consumers, and all the communities that shape and are shaped by any given enterprise. This is critical, and because the outcome of a just wage dialogue cannot be predetermined, that is why we do not specify a particular wage figure or assume that it will be the same in every workplace. We hope that this last facet makes our Just Wage Framework useful to those in a variety of national contexts, even though it was developed primarily by those whose expertise is in American and European history, politics, and policymaking.

## A CONVERSATION WORTH BEGINNING

The model that we suggest is a conversation starter, not a conversation stopper; the idea of a just wage cannot be separated from questions of a decent life and human dignity. As we commemorated seventy-five years of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 2023, we do not want to forget that this Universal Declaration expresses not only the right to work, but also “the right to just and favourable remuneration” that can ensure “an existence worthy of human dignity.”<sup>14</sup> Justice and dignity cannot be separated. Persons do not live by bread alone – but bread is necessary for a dignified life and a wage can buy so much more than bread; a just wage can buy just hope.



The model that we suggest is a conversation starter, not a conversation stopper; the idea of a just wage cannot be separated from questions of a decent life and human dignity.

<sup>14</sup> Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 23, 3.

# Raising the Social Wage

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Laura Bambrick

Dr Laura Bambrick is the Social Policy & Employment Affairs Officer at the Irish Congress of Trade Unions. Congress is the umbrella body for 46 unions and seven associate members, representing over 700,000 workers and their families, and the largest civil society organisation on the island of Ireland.



Credit: Creative Commons: Karolina Grabowska through Pexels.com

## INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic was both an unprecedented public health crisis and the biggest economic shock in the history of the State, causing unparalleled disruption to the economy and individual livelihoods.<sup>1</sup>

It exposed the weaknesses in our social safety net and heightened public demand for a bigger role for government in protecting people's living standards against common risks.<sup>2</sup>

A period of heightened inflation has seen consumer prices and mortgage costs rising faster than incomes since 2021, adding further to the demand for government to do more.

None of this is to say that people were previously blind to inadequacies and gaps in the funding and provision of social welfare income supports and public services.

1 In May 2020, over one million workers, close to half the workforce were without work and reliant on a pandemic unemployment payment or wage subsidy (€350 a week).

2 A 2021 OECD opinion survey found very wide public demand in Ireland (70%) for government to do more to protect people's financial well-being and address gaps in social protection. This was the highest demand recorded in the ten high-income EU member states included in the survey and markedly higher than the average for this group of countries (54%). Stefano Scarpetta, Monika Queisser, and Valerie Frey, "Risks That Matter 2020: The Long Reach of COVID-19" (Paris: OECD, April 28, 2021).

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Access to free or low-cost services reduce out-of-pocket expenses and act as a virtual income top-up to a household's cash income from work or welfare.

However, calls for reform typically focused on parts of the welfare system in isolation, rather than changing the fundamental nature of the system – minimalist and heavily means-tested social provision catering largely for the poorest households unable to meet their needs from their own resources, that is closer to the US and UK welfare systems than those of northern and western Europe.

For some, the next logical development in the future direction of the welfare system is a basic income – a tax-free regular payment sufficient to cover essential needs, paid from general taxation to every resident irrespective of their age, wealth, income, or employment status. That is, it is universal and unconditional of all qualifying criteria of current social welfare income supports, including a means-test and work requirement. It would replace all existing social welfare payments, income tax relief and minimum wage protections.

Others, including trade unions, hold the view that the money needed to fund an adequate basic income would be more effective and better spent on improving income supports and providing high quality universal public services. In other words, raising the social wage.

## WHAT IS MEANT BY THE SOCIAL WAGE?

A household's final income depends on the money wages its members receive in the labour market *minus* the taxes and social insurance contributions on those wages paid to the state *plus* the social welfare income supports and public services it receives from the state. The supports and services received from the state constitutes the social wage.

Access to free or low-cost services reduce out-of-pocket expenses and act as a virtual income top-up to a household's cash income from work or welfare. There are no

clear criteria in the academic literature on redistribution and welfare systems for deciding which public services to include as part of the social wage.

In principle, the social wage encompasses all publicly-funded goods and services. State spending on, for example, policing, sanitation, broadband or roads and street lighting benefits everyone and lifts the living standards of the entire community.

In practice, conventional measures of the social wage adopt a much narrower definition and is limited to expenditure from the public finances on areas such as housing, childcare, education, health, transport and other goods and services that have a direct and tangible benefit to households, with a focus on social wage differences across income groups or over time.

Occasionally, analysis of the distribution of the social wage will include tax expenditure. Tax expenditures are a form of hidden public spending. Reducing taxes on income offers the illusion of a pay rise by increasing take-home pay. But tax cutting is a short-sighted way to protect and improve living standards. Not just because tax benefits tend to disproportionately

go to higher income households but because cutting taxes while spending more cannot be pursued indefinitely.

The deficit it creates in the public finances inevitably leads to spending cuts.

In the name of helping ordinary working families through income tax cuts, these same households will have their social wage gutted in terms of reduced provision of public services and inadequate social welfare income supports.

What is more, there is no scope for tax cutting in Ireland; quite the opposite, in fact.

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Reducing taxes on income offers the illusion of a pay rise by increasing take-home pay. But tax cutting is a short-sighted way to protect and improve living standards. Not just because tax benefits tend to disproportionately go to higher income households but because cutting taxes while spending more cannot be pursued indefinitely.



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In 2019 (pre COVID-related spending), Ireland spent €2,801 less per person compared with the average spend in similar high-income member states.

On the face of it, the public finances appear to be in rude health with very large budgetary surpluses projected out to 2026. But the headline figure masks significant vulnerabilities. The headline is being bolstered by an exceptional, but unreliable, inflow of corporation tax receipts from a very small number of foreign multinational companies.<sup>3</sup> This is on top of the State facing long-term cost challenges from an ageing population and the twin green and digital transitions, while having one of the highest levels of per-capita national debt in the world.

Trade unions are not alone in warning that the direction of travel for policy will need to be net-revenue raising, as opposed to net-revenue reducing.<sup>4</sup> The Foundations for the Future report of the Commission on Taxation and Welfare recommends that “the overall level of revenues raised from tax and pay related social insurance as a share of national income must increase materially.”<sup>5</sup>

## THE SOCIAL WAGE IN IRELAND

Ireland has very low levels of per-capita public spending by Western European standards.<sup>6</sup> In 2019 (pre COVID-related spending), Ireland spent €2,801 less per person compared with the average spend in similar high-income member states.<sup>7</sup> This amounts to an annual shortfall of €14 billion when scaled to the

population.<sup>8</sup> Our young population – that is our comparatively low age-related expenditure on pensions, healthcare and eldercare – only explains a fraction of this spending gap. Because of the minimalist and heavily targeted nature of the Irish welfare system, the value of the social wage for full-time workers is exceptionally low.

An unusual feature of our (and other English-speaking nations’) welfare system is that despite paying pay-related social insurance contributions when in employment, workers receive low flat-rate benefits in return if they lose their job, have a baby, or get sick.

In almost all EU member states, contributory social welfare income supports are pay-related (i.e. the weekly payment is a percentage of a worker’s previous wage), to allow workers continue to pay their mortgage and other bills so as to maintain their normal living standards in the short-term when out of work.<sup>9</sup>

By way of demonstration, Jobseeker’s Benefit (€220 a week) replaces just 25% of the average wage or 49% of the full-time minimum wage in Ireland. Whereas pay-related unemployment income supports in Belgium replace 91% of a worker’s previous wage, 79% in Denmark and 69% in the Netherlands.<sup>10</sup>



Because of the minimalist and heavily targeted nature of the Irish welfare system, the value of the social wage for full-time workers is exceptionally low.

There are means-tested top-up cash benefits paid for a dependent spouse or partner (€146) and for each dependent child (€42 if aged under 12 years and €50 if 12 years or over) and a range of non-cash benefits tied to reducing the cost of renting in private rented

3 The Department of Finance estimates that approximately €12 billion of the corporation tax take in 2023 will be windfall in nature – if these were removed it would turn a planned budgetary surplus into a deficit: Economics Division of the Department of Finance, “Future-Proofing the Public Finances: The next Steps” (Dublin: An Roinn Airgeadais, May 2023).

4 ICTU, “Making Work Pay: Budget 2024 Submission” (Dublin: Irish Congress of Trade Unions, September 19, 2023).

5 Report of the Commission on Taxation and Welfare, “Foundations for the Future” (Dublin: The Commission on Taxation and Welfare, 2022), 28.

6 Kieran McQuinn, Conor O’Toole, and Eoin Kenny, “Quarterly Economic Commentary, Autumn 2023” (Economic and Social Research Institute, October 4, 2023), 46 (Table D.1).

7 The comparative group of peer member states are Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Netherlands and Sweden. They are the Nordic and Western EU countries with a population of over a million (thus excluding Luxembourg) and with an output in excess of €30,000 per person (thus excluding Portugal, Spain and Italy).

8 ICTU, “No Going Back: A New Deal towards a Safe and Secure Future for All” (Dublin: Irish Congress of Trade Unions, May 27, 2020), 32.

9 ICTU, “The Social Wage: Pay-Related Benefit for Unemployed Workers” (Dublin: Irish Congress of Trade Unions, March 2023).

10 OECD, “Benefits in Unemployment, Share of Previous Income”. <https://doi.org/10.1787/0cc0d0e5-en>, 2023.





Tara Mines, Co. Meath. Credit: Shutterstock ID 2327858547

accommodation,<sup>11</sup> healthcare, education, utilities, and transport, that increase the replacement rate<sup>12</sup> of our social welfare income supports and raises the social wage.

However, workers on short-term contributory income supports with a working spouse or partner, savings, or other source of income are markedly less likely than households on long-term social welfare income supports to qualify for these uplifts to the social wage.<sup>13</sup>

In short: workers see their income fall off a cliff during short gaps in employment. The recent lay-off of the 650-strong workforce in Tara Mines in County Meath stands as a case in point.<sup>14</sup> Free or heavily subsidised publicly-funded services also have a big part to play in making people less vulnerable to financial insecurity in and out of work.

11 There is no income support top-up for welfare recipients with a mortgage to repay.

12 The replacement rate measures, as a percentage, the proportion of out-of-work benefits received when unemployed against take home pay if in work. See: Social Justice Ireland, "Replacement Rates and Unemployment" (Dublin: Social Justice Ireland, December 2009).

13 For example, the replacement rate for a lone-parent with two or more children in receipt of One-Parent Family Payment is over 80% average weekly earnings. PBO, "Replacement Rates for 2023" (Dublin: Parliamentary Budget Offices, July 2023).

14 Flanagan, Peter, "Tara Mines production suspended with 650 workers temporarily laid off," *The Irish Times*, June 12, 2023.

Again, Ireland is atypical in heavily means-testing access to public services over universal provision.<sup>15</sup> As such, workers above modest earnings rarely pass the means test and must pay market prices out of their take-home pay for essential services, driving up their cost of living and wage demands. For example, Ireland is the only EU country without universal free-at-the-point-of-use GP care. A GP visit is €53 on average per visit nationally, with consultation fees higher in urban areas.<sup>16</sup> Fees in Dublin city can be between €65 and €80.<sup>17</sup>

Across the rest of the EU, access to public services is contingency-based. People, for example, with a child and a job will need childcare. They are eligible for publicly-funded childcare at little or no charge regardless of the size of their wage or household income.

Exiting the pandemic and in the teeth of a cost of living crisis, trade unions refused to allow this once-in-a-century opportunity for

15 The exception to this rule is free education for all children, free travel for everyone over 66, and free GP visits for carers, children aged under 8 and for everyone aged 70 and over.

16 Sheelah Connolly et al., "An Analysis of the Primary Care Systems of Ireland and Northern Ireland" (Dublin: ESRI, March 10, 2022), 53.

17 Cullen, Paul, "Free GP Care for All Could Finally Be on the Cards - but Serious Barriers Remain," *The Irish Times*, January 17, 2023.



Ireland is atypical in heavily means-testing access to public services over universal provision. As such, workers above modest earnings rarely pass the means test and must pay market prices out of their take-home pay for essential services, driving up their cost of living and wage demands.

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pathbreaking welfare reform to go ignored. On May Day 2022, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions published comparative research on the social wage gap between workers in Ireland and other high-income EU countries as a platform for radical change.<sup>18</sup>

In response, and to offset the effects of soaring inflation, good progress has since been made in raising the social wage through a number of measures to permanently widen access to public goods and services and reduce the out-of-pocket cost of childcare, primary education and school transport, healthcare (notably including abolishing hospital in-patient charges publicly funding contraception and IVF), and increasing the very low qualifying income thresholds for eligibility to free GP care and social and cost rental housing.

A new pay-related jobseeker's income support is under consideration and new workers' rights to pay-related domestic violence leave and sick pay are being rolled-out. Ireland was one of three of the EU's 27 members not to require an employer to provide paid sick leave to workers too ill to work.<sup>19</sup> There is also a commitment to introduce mandatory employer contributions to a worker's retirement savings. Ireland is the only OECD country not to operate auto-enrolment or a similar pension savings scheme. The qualifying age for the State pension is to remain at 66 and eligibility for a fuel allowance top-up (€33 a week) has been widened to cover some 80,000 more retired workers over 70.

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18 ICTU, "The Social Wage: Pay-Related Benefit for Unemployed Workers."

19 In 23 EU countries employment law requires employers to pay sick pay. In two, the requirement stems from sectoral collective agreements. In three, it is at the discretion of the employer – Ireland, Portugal, Greece.

Despite this, there is still a considerable distance to go to before the Irish welfare system is in line with how well our European peer group protects household living standards against the vagaries of life and markets. For example, given that acute capacity constraints in our public healthcare services are already significantly impacting the delivery of existing entitlement, without a matching pro rate increase in health staff, widening coverage will remain an empty promise.<sup>20</sup>

## FUNDING A RAISE IN THE SOCIAL WAGE

If government is to scale up spending to improve the adequacy of social welfare income supports and expand eligibility to public services, then it needs to generate more tax revenue. Not only has Ireland comparatively low levels of public spending, the overall level of revenues raised from tax and social insurance as a share of national income is low in comparison to the EU average and compared to other high-income member states.<sup>21</sup>

This is mainly a function of our under-taxation of labour income. The Implicit Tax Rate (ITR) on labour income - income tax, USC and social insurance combined - is 33.5% and below the EU average of 38.1%. However, drilling down into the headline figure shows that the ITR paid by employees in Ireland (24.3%) exceeds the EU average (21.1%). The shortfall is from the revenue collected from employers. The yield from employer social insurance contributions would need to almost double to reach the EU average. See *Table 1*.



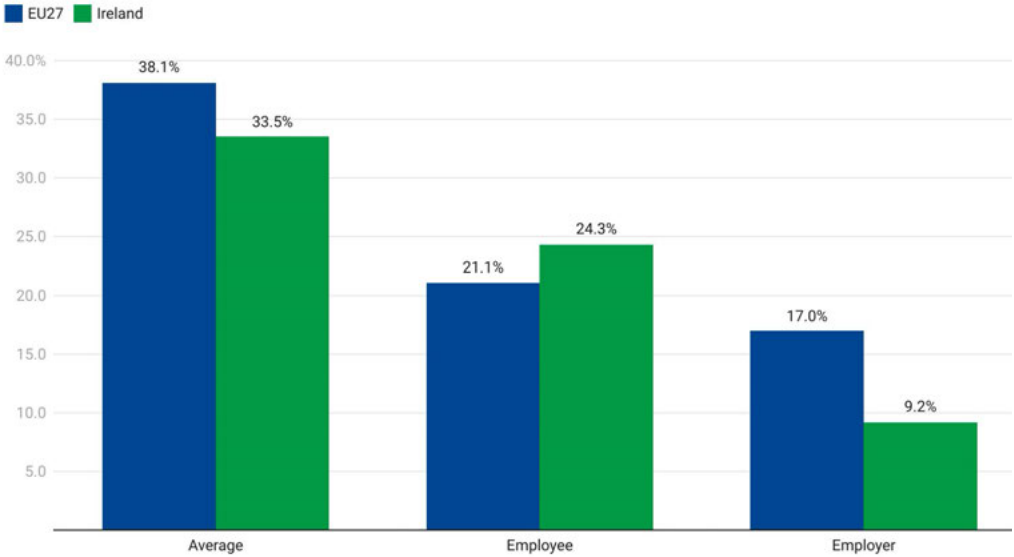
The yield from employer social insurance contributions would need to almost double to reach the EU average.

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20 For example, GPs and general practice nurses play a crucial role in the delivery of Sláintecare. Yet we continue to have a severe shortage of both and it is likely to get worse. One in seven GPs are aged over 65.

21 Ireland's revenue yield from taxes on income from capital (wealth and property) and from labour income (income taxes and social insurance) are below average. The revenue yield from consumption taxes (VAT and Excises) are broadly in line with the EU average. For more, see: ICTU, "Making Work Pay: Budget 2024 Submission."

# Implicit Tax Rate on Labour Income in EU27 and Ireland, 2019



**Table 1:** Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice • Source: Eurostat

Income from self-employment is also under-taxed. The self-employed pay a 4% rate of social insurance compared to the standard 15.05% contribution paid in respect of most employees – comprising of 4% paid directly by the employee and 11.05% paid on their behalf by their employer. Historically, self-employed workers only qualified for a narrow range of contributory social welfare income supports which was the justification for their smaller contribution. But this is no longer the case.

Following social welfare reforms by the previous government, 350,000 self-employed contributors are now covered for all bar 4 of the 24 contributory income supports in return for a contribution 11% lower than that made in respect of PAYE workers.



**Our minimalist and heavily means-tested welfare system is not fit for the twenty-first century. It doesn't work for working households or the wider economy.**

The State's own advisory body, the Tax Strategy Group, has proposed that consideration be given to gradually adjusting the self-employed social insurance contribution rate to the employer rate (i.e. from 4% to 11.05%).<sup>22</sup> This is a call that has been echoed by a range of bodies, including both the Pensions Commission and the Taxation and Welfare Commission.<sup>23</sup>

Our under-taxation of labour as a share of national income amounts to over €10 billion.

## CONCLUSION

Our minimalist and heavily means-tested welfare system is not fit for the twenty-first century. It doesn't work for working households or the wider economy.

Widening access to public services and improving the adequacy of social welfare income supports would make workers less vulnerable to financial insecurity in and out of work. It would cut out-of-pocket costs, easing the pressure on wages. It would reduce search

<sup>22</sup> Tax Strategy Group, "Pay Related Social Insurance for Self-Employed Workers" (Dublin: An Roin Gnóthai Fostaíochta agus Coimirce Sóisialaí, August 2020).

<sup>23</sup> The Pensions Commission, "Report of the Commission on Pension" (Dublin: The Department of Social Protection, October 2021), 166; Report of the Commission on Taxation and Welfare, "Foundations for the Future," 273.

costs for unemployed workers to find a new job that better matches their skills, promoting pay and productivity growth. It would reduce poverty traps for low-work intensity households moving from welfare into work or more hours worked, increasing labour supply and narrowing the gap between the haves and have-nots. It would leave our welfare system less susceptible to attack that there are ‘those who pay for everything while getting nothing in return’. When people know that they can rely on the welfare system if and when they need it, it strengthens social solidarity and public support for tax and social spending.

It will be argued that increasing the tax take to the EU average in order to cover the costs associated with raising the social wage will stunt economic growth and erode national competitiveness. But we are currently experiencing ongoing affordability crises in housing and childcare, and chronic underfunding and capacity constraints in delivery of public services, which is having far more negative implications for our competitiveness.<sup>24</sup>

Besides, we only have to look at the success of Nordic countries: Despite higher than average taxes to fund their comprehensive welfare system, their economies rank amongst the most competitive in the world, with high levels of labour productivity and per-capita output.

The outbreak of COVID-19 brought the deep failings in how we protect workers’ income and living standards into sharp focus. Just as with the Second World War, “one happy consequence of this otherwise desperately unhappy experience”<sup>25</sup> can be to radically transform our welfare system.

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24 NCPC, “Ireland’s Competitiveness Challenge 2023” (Dublin: Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, September 2023).

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25 John S. Dryzek and Robert E. Goodin, “Risk-Sharing and Social Justice: The Motivational Foundations of the Post-War Welfare State,” *British Journal of Political Science* 16, no. 1 (1986): 1–34.

# Just Transition and Representation of Farming in Ireland

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## INTRODUCTION

From an Irish perspective, the exponential growth in dairy and beef production produces a major challenge in reaching our net zero carbon targets. At the same time, supporting a Just Transition demands that farmers receive financial and other supports as they transition from an intensive model of production. Encouraging more carbon sequestration, together with stemming the tide of biodiversity loss, and monitoring ever-increasing levels of pollution across our precious water ways, are all major objectives. Yet many of our environmental challenges come at a major cost to small famers in particular and the rural economy generally, requiring a robust and sustainable and Just Transition plan.

As suggested by several farmers and commentators, this process requires clear and transparent monetary payment for environmental services rendered as well as fair farm gate prices for produce, worked out in advance,<sup>1</sup> to ensure an equitable transition in the face of our climate crisis. Such ongoing struggles to secure transitional justice can draw on lessons learned from the experimental ‘brown to green’ transformation of Bord na Mona and the subsequent fall-out for peat workers and other communities in the Midlands.<sup>2</sup>

1 See several conferences and reports noted in this paper. A key element here will also be the need to compensate farmers for the consequences of extreme weather: Mairead Maguire, “Farmers Welcome Compensation for Unharvested Crops after ‘major Losses’ Due to Extreme Weather,” *TheJournal.ie*, November 18, 2023, <https://www.thejournal.ie/farmers-welcome-compensation-for-unharvested-crops-after-major-losses-due-to-extreme-weather-6219474-Nov2023/000> in compensation for ruined crops.”, “container-title”: “TheJournal.ie”, “event-place”: “Dublin”, “language”: “en”, “publisher-place”: “Dublin”, “title”: “Farmers welcome compensation for unharvested crops after ‘major losses’ due to extreme weather”, “URL”: “https://www.thejournal.ie/farmers-welcome-compensation-for-unharvested-crops-after-major-losses-due-to-extreme-weather-6219474-Nov2023/”, “author”: “[{“family”: “Maguire”, “given”: “Mairead”}], “accessed”: “[“date-parts”: [ [“2024”, 1, 22] ]], “issued”: “[“date-parts”: [ [“2023”, 11, 18] ]], “prefix”: “A key element here will also be the need to compensate farmers for the consequences of extreme weather.”], “schema”: “https://github.com/citation-style-language/schema/raw/master/csl-citation.json”]

2 See for instance Ciaran Mulvey’s recommendations in his progress report from April 2020: Kieran Mulvey, “Just Transition Progress Report” (Dublin: Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment, April 2020). Further discussions of plans to scope an Educational Centre for Climate Change as part of a Just Transition, dovetails with the planned re-wetting of bogs and the growth of renewable energy in the region (See my draft ‘Midlands Report for a Climate Centre’).

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Yet many of our environmental challenges come at a major cost to small famers in particular and the rural economy generally, requiring a robust and sustainable and Just Transition plan.

In this paper I seek to highlight the central importance of farming and farmers in creating a Just Transition in Ireland. Recalling ongoing media and historical filmic representations of land and farming, which tend to put farmers in opposition to environmentalists. These tensions have been most recently articulated by a number of conferences on the topic and echo an environmental history of farming and the rural economy on film in Ireland. A quick survey of Irish farming films help to demonstrate these tensions and call out a range of pressures, which speak to the ongoing challenge of realising a Just Transition in which farmers need to be centrally involved by co-creating solutions.

## CURRENT CONVERSATIONS

Tensions are rising between urban and rural communities, environmentalists and businesses, alongside farmers who have to make major sacrifices by transforming their production practices, as a transformation of food production becomes a necessity. This is before the even more controversial land use-changes are discussed. At a conference ‘Rewild and Renew’ on Biodiversity loss at Dublin City University (26<sup>th</sup> April 2023), the Minister for the Environment, Eamon Ryan, called out various tensions in the body politic and affirmed that farmers will nonetheless have to be at the front line in any restoration of our natural habitat.<sup>3</sup> Government policy at present is focused in particular on land use reform, as Ireland strives to face up to its climate challenges and EU targets.

In a later Environmental Protection Agency conference, titled ‘Climate change on ground: Land use, Land-use change and

3 Faculty of Humanities & Social Science, “Politics of Division Will Not Help Us Address Climate Crisis - Minister Ryan,” Dublin City University, April 26, 2023, <https://www.dcu.ie/humanities-and-social-sciences/news/2023/may/politics-division-will-not-help-us-address-climate>.

Forestry' (May 25<sup>th</sup> 2023), the Minister for the Environment again re-affirmed the need for dialogue with farmers to ensure a fair transition.<sup>4</sup> But a number of farmers speaking to the conference in the afternoon discussed how among the top stressors for farmers at present were 'government policy, with outsiders not understanding farming', and calling out 'ongoing concerns over the future of the farm'. Thomas Ryan, who is head of agri-sustainability and customer engagement with Tirlán, continued that 'this does not equal denial of climate change', as some suggest. As is often said by farmers and other professions at the coalface of the climate crisis; *it is hard to be green when you are in the red!*

By all accounts, regulations, extra funding, and clarity into the future are badly needed to make the radical change in land management that is needed over the next decade. While Paul O'Brien who is a sheep farmer and works for the Irish Farmers Organisation, spoke passionately about how farmers are very suspicious. Because of what has happened in the past, they can't simply make a 'leap of faith', much less countenance an 'income deficit' in the current economic context. Basically, as with all difficult transitions, 'farmers need to be supported'. Later a young female farmer from Cork, Nicole Keoghan, echoed such sentiments and spoke of fears about a lack of support, not having enough knowledge to inform such a difficult decision, and she also called out a general lack of communication on the ground.

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As is often said by farmers and other professions at the coalface of the climate crisis; *it is hard to be green when you are in the red!*

Finally, the well-known agricultural journalist and farmer Darragh McCullough, reaffirmed the need for farmers to know exactly 'what effect this will have on income'; whether it is re-wetting, replanting forests (which has a long

lead in time for any return on investment), or in considering more radical changes of land usage, including emotive calls for the culling of the national herd. Specific funded policies and strategies urgently need to be worked out, at both EU and national Government level, to ensure a Just Transition for this climate emergency is managed effectively. Farmers must be fully compensated if they are to drive such radical changes around land use for the good of Ireland and the whole planet. At the heart of a Just Transition is the idea of a just wage. These sentiments were affirmed together with ongoing need for dialogue and transparency when NESC presented its findings on 30<sup>th</sup> June 2023 in its conference titled 'Exploring Just Transition in Agriculture and Land Use'.

## TELLING THE STORY OF BEST PRACTICE

The current conversation clearly pulls against the grain of an idealised green idyllic island, especially as perceived from an outsider's perspective. We rely heavily on marketing Ireland to tourists as a simple, *green* island. The reality is more contentious and greater levels of dialogue are required. Such discourse is further hampered because of a relatively small media industry capable of focusing specifically on broadcast or filmic output to help map out and catalogue these challenging environmental tensions, while at the same time foregrounding the demands and expectations for a Just Transition. We need to publicise robust models of best practice and ways of articulating this green sustainable story with regards to agriculture in particular. Ireland affords a useful test site for a burgeoning environmentally-focused media to speak to such debates, calling out the country's 'laggard' status in facing up to the challenges of the climate crisis, specifically regarding the representation of farmers.<sup>5</sup> But this eco-media agenda appears to be at odds with the nostalgic, pro-social rural stories populating our screens, yet serving as a barometer of ever-changing ecological land ethics.

4 Harry McGee and Nathan Johns, "Climate Change Could Place Even Further Stress on Overstretched Land Use," *The Irish Times*, May 25, 2023, <https://www.irishtimes.com/environment/2023/05/25/climate-change-could-place-even-further-stress-on-overstretched-land-use/>.

5 Niall Sargent, "Taoiseach Tells EU He Is Not Proud of Ireland Role as Europe's Climate 'Laggard,'" *Green News Ireland*, January 18, 2018, <https://greennews.ie/taoiseach-tells-eu-not-proud-ireland-climate-laggard-role/>.

As affirmed by our most eminent climatologist and environmentalist John Sweeney, sitting astride ‘the main storm tracks of the North Atlantic, Ireland’s location has historically rendered it vulnerable to the vicissitudes of weather and climate’. Sweeney continues, by affirming how ‘Irish society was a greater hostage to climate than many other parts of Europe, where the Industrial Revolution has enabled the worst effects of the Little Ice Age to be mitigated... As Ireland modernised, new concerns such [a]s urban flooding emerged, and new ways of managing climate risks were devised’.<sup>6</sup> However it appears that farming has not effectively managed such climate risk or insured against the ever changing weather patterns, as the industry strives for increasing financial return on investment of both time and resources.

## THE ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT IN IRELAND: FROM LITERATURE TO FILM

The roots of contemporary Irish environmentalism can probably be traced back to Robert Lloyd Praeger’s seminal publication *The Way that I Went*,<sup>7</sup> which comprehensively described the flora and fauna across parts of the island. Perhaps even more notable was his establishment of the Irish equivalent of the National Trust - An Taisce - in 1948. Unfortunately, in the decades since then, the range of flora and fauna has radically reduced, in no small measure because of the growth of industrial modes of farming. Up to then, the Irish State had been economically determined and culturally defined as a rural and agricultural society. Such a long-term preoccupation, even fixation with the land, was augmented by a long and troubled history as a British colony, whereby sovereignty and ownership of the land was contested for hundreds of years. Meanwhile, the unique beauty of the land(scape) as a fixed and unchanging topography was affirmed by romantic nationalists like the globally celebrated poet William Butler Yeats, whose

creative output served as a bulwark in the cultural and political struggle for national independence during the early decades of the twentieth century.

Consequently, the dominant myth visualised within Irish culture has remained a pastoral one, which foregrounds an almost Arcadian evocation of the happy swain close to nature, alongside the cyclical rhythms of the earth. This myth was certainly fostered and encouraged, according to various studies by cultural nationalists of the newly formed independent State from the 1920s onwards, most notably recalling Ireland’s long-time political leader and visionary Eamon de Valera and his whole-hearted endorsement of the primitive frugality visualised in *Man of Aran*.<sup>8</sup>

Robert Flaherty’s 1930s *Man of Aran*,<sup>9</sup> up to more contemporary representations in Jim Sheridan’s 1990 adaptation of J. B. Keane’s play *The Field*,<sup>10</sup> reflect the ever expanding cultural and economic power and importance of land ownership, coupled with the simultaneous ever-expanding but narrowing range of food production over the decades. Meanwhile Yi-fu Tuan’s notion of ‘topophilia’ and the idea that humans have culturally mediated affinities for certain types of landscape<sup>11</sup> might also be foregrounded,<sup>12</sup> when trying to tease out tensions around environmental conflicts across a range of audio-visual texts. This most certainly underpins the potent representation of the rugged primitivism of *Man of Aran*, as against the pastoral farming beauty of *The Field*.<sup>13</sup>

More recent indigenous national films including, *Pilgrim Hill* (2013)<sup>14</sup> and *An Cailín Ciúin* (2022)<sup>15</sup> speak to contemporary re-imaginings of a farming past and present, where a greater articulation of the tenets of a Just Transition are brought into focus.

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8 See, for example: Patrick Brereton, “Farming on Irish Film: An Ecological Reading,” in *Ecoscene: Image, Rhetoric, Nature*, ed. Sidney I. Dobrin and Sean Morey (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 2009), 185–202.

9 *Man of Aran* (Gaumont-British, 1934).

10 *The Field* (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1990).

11 Cited in Buell 2001: 26

12 Cited in Lawrence Buell, *Writing from and Endangered World: Literature, Culture and Environment in the US and Beyond* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001), 26.

13 Kevin Rockett, Luke Gibbons, and John Hill, *Cinema and Ireland* (London: Routledge, 2014).

14 *Pilgrim Hill* (Element Pictures, 2013).

15 *An Cailín Ciúin* (Break Out Pictures, 2022).

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6 John Sweeney, “Climate and Society in Modern Ireland: Past and Future Vulnerabilities,” *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy: Archaeology, Culture, History, Literature* 120C, no. 1 (2020): 391, <https://doi.org/10.1353/ria.2020.0005>.

7 Robert Lloyd Praeger, *The Way That I Went* (Dublin: Hodges, Figgis, & Co., 1937).



Concerns around the big extractive rancher farmers and their unadulterated drive towards profit maximisation is echoed for instance in a throwaway comment by rewilding activist Eoghan Dalton – who gave a keynote speech at DCU’s Biodiversity conference (26<sup>th</sup> April 2023) – that the island is just one big industrial farm, with little consideration for biodiversity loss.

Historically of course, farmers are at the cutting edge of climate change. They are also engaged in addressing water pollution and biodiversity loss, and know well how our fragile eco-system remains prone to risk, especially through various forms of over-production. Nonetheless, farmers rightly seek to display a deep sense of place, communal solidarity and environmental stewardship, as displayed in seminal Irish classics such as the aforementioned *Man of Aran* (1934), *The Field* (1990), or *The Quiet Man* (1952).<sup>16</sup> More contemporary (albeit also historical) tales like *Pilgrim Hill* or *An Cailín Ciúin* can be further evaluated as echoing and reformulating such tropes of beautiful landscape, while representing and valorising primitive modes of production within the agricultural sector. At the same time, they continue to embrace deep nationalist values, while foregrounding postcolonial and even at times a pathological love of the land. Such tensions are well dramatized in *An Cailín Ciúin*. The Oscar-nominated Irish language film celebrates the lived experience of a quiet innocent country girl, who must cope with familial disharmony. The entire film is framed against a rural topography and embedded within contrasting cultures and environmental values embodied and represented by two very different small farming families. Such an intimate farming-based story affords a fruitful site to re-examine various contested forms of communal (eco-) identity, trauma and fractured habitats, alongside more sustainable modes of agricultural practice, within an erstwhile romanticised and idealist post-colonial touristic site.

As a primal rural profession, agriculture on film most especially serves as a shorthand and measure of ever-changing ecological land ethics, as was argued in a close reading of Gerald Barret’s *Pilgrim Hill*. The film foregrounds a form of social and environmental dysfunctionality in contemporary agricultural practices, where most pointedly the pervasive threat and risk of having one’s whole livelihood wiped out by tuberculous (TB) remains challenging.<sup>17</sup> In the face of this threat, little financial or other supports are available outside of the immediate family. This is a real-life challenge for Irish farmers. Depicting this harsh reality can be particularly potent for helping outsiders to appreciate the complexities and the ongoing need for a Just Transition, especially with regard to monetary security, as well as maintaining equilibrium, cohesiveness, and resilience within a rural economy.

Theoretically, the significant problems that have been associated with Irish agriculture, particularly since its intensification in the post-war period, and with accession to the European Economic Community are well noted in the literature. But *Pilgrim Hill* can be seen to articulate a critical vision of a contemporary small farmer’s life in crisis and the tensions of rural life more generally and more viscerally. Within such an important film there is an over-riding sense of decline, even a sense of an elegy for the precarious livelihood of the small farmer. Such creative filmic investigations help to challenge and critique the pervasive rhetoric of the controversial *Food Harvest 2020: A Vision for Irish Agriculture and Fisheries* policy, produced by the Irish Department of Agriculture,<sup>18</sup> in association with powerful agribusiness interests, which embraced an aggressively pro-growth strategy by committing to adding up to 50 per cent to the national herd.

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<sup>16</sup> *The Quiet Man* (Republic Films, 1952).

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<sup>17</sup> See: Sean Shanagher and Pat Brereton, “Pilgrim Hill: Alienated Farmers and Degraded Ecologies,” *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 31, no. 3 (2020): 75–93.

<sup>18</sup> Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, “Food Harvest 2020: A Vision for Irish Agri-Food and Fisheries” (Dublin: Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, 2010).



*Pilgrim Hill* can be seen to articulate a critical vision of a contemporary small farmer's life in crisis and the tensions of rural life more generally and more viscerally. Within such an important film there is an over-riding sense of decline, even a sense of an elegy for the precarious livelihood of the small farmer.

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None of this is in harmony with the struggle to meet our climate targets. But drawing out how and why farmers might chafe at simplistic slogans issued by primarily urban-based environmentalists – in the face of the reality of heavy-indebtedness, low prices “at the gate”, and other critical economic challenges – is something that film is uniquely placed to help.

## TRAGEDY OF THE COMMONS: POST-COLONIAL EVOCATIONS OF LAND IN IRELAND

Aldo Leopold's famous 'land ethic' rests upon a single unifying premise: 'that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts'.<sup>19</sup> His vision served to enlarge the boundaries of community to include soils, water, plants, animals and so forth. Especially since his 'rediscovery' in the 1960s, Leopold's thesis has become a central tenet of environmental thinking and the symbiotic relationship he proposes between humans and nature has remained the dominant orthodoxy of much ecological thinking. Such a simple notion helps create a more sustained and long-term beneficial environmental ethic of place that in turn might holistically connect individuals and their communities, drawing upon such long-lasting symbiotic relationships.

Meanwhile the hegemonic orthodoxy of mainstream (neoliberal) economics and monetary growth culture considers nature primarily as a resource that essentially contributes to human value, which in turn is evident across most mainstream cinema. The alternative recuperative notion of a land ethic

is most clearly manifested in the 'Tragedy of the Commons', which serves towards coalescing environmental film analysis and occurs when individual stewards of the land (farmers), sharing a resource held in common, appear to only act in their own short-term, self-interest, and thereby progressively degrade the collective resource of their land holdings.

This tension is evoked and played out against an evolving representation of farmers as benevolent stewards of the land, as against despoilers of the land – as witnessed in *Man of Aran*, *The Quiet Man* and *The Field*. Meanwhile, the more complex debate unfolding regarding land – including bogland and forestry – is in measuring how such 'natural capital' can contribute by functioning more effectively as a carbon sink and how this process can be measured against the increasing carbon output in the atmosphere.<sup>20</sup> This includes the more potent methane emanating from the exponential growth of ruminants, especially in the dairy herd, which needs to be controlled into the future, as Ireland strives to meet its EU carbon targets.

Ethical and more sustainable environmental agricultural methods are needed to help counter this dilemma around ever increasing carbon emissions. These include a massive growth in organic farming and the application of the principles of co-existing with, rather than dominating natural systems, alongside sustaining or building natural soil fertilizers. It also entails minimising various forms of pollution and minimising the use of non-renewable resources, while always ensuring the ethical treatment of animals. All the while, this ethical Just Transition model incorporates the ultimate manifestation of close identification and engagement with place. These ideals are echoed most pointedly in E.O. Wilson's theory of 'biophilia',<sup>21</sup> which insinuates that because humans evolved from nature, we still carry a part of nature in our hearts and this is where humans feel their relationship with and responsibilities to the land, through the

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<sup>19</sup> Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1947), 204.

<sup>20</sup> For a positive account, consider: Caroline Sullivan, "High Nature Value (HNV) Farmland: Getting Results from Farming for Biodiversity," *Working Notes* 34, no. 86 (June 2020): 39–44.

<sup>21</sup> Edward O. Wilson, *Biophilia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

complexity of human-land relations.

Yet, as Irish environmental scholar and political activist John Barry asserts, the majority of people in modern society ‘have no direct transformative experience of nature,<sup>22</sup> having little direct connection with the land, except as some dramatic natural disaster. The arts and storytelling, including filmic evocation of such ecological and ethical debates, can depict and communicate these healthy farming methods and thus sow the seeds of an alternative approach. This would involve good stewardship towards green citizenship and securing a Just Transition – and the Just Wages it demands – while promoting awareness of our interdependence and co-dependence with our environment.



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## CONCLUDING REMARKS

As modern society becomes more and more detached from its rural roots, audiences need the stimulus of powerful tales to provide ‘creative imaginaries’ of all our duties and responsibility to nourish and protect both human and non-human ecologies. Such tales can be especially pertinent when framed and played out using the ongoing financial and environmental tensions embedded in the move to low-cost food production and agriculture generally. Such media can project the growing disconnect of human and non-human natures, which is symptomatic of capitalist and more recently neoliberal world-ecology. This can be appreciated through representations of the Irish farmers on film (specifically small farmers), as well as through a detailed understanding of and engagement with the material realities of contemporary modes of

industrial modes of agriculture. As Minister Eamon Ryan has made clear, farmers can be the heroes in this struggle around land use management and climate justice.

Appreciating the full potential of film and visual media generally to enhance or expand our perception and understanding of environmental issues and ecological interrelationships, demands both qualitative and quantitative analysis. In our recent edited volume *Ireland and the Climate Crisis*,<sup>23</sup> I went so far as to highlight the growth of small independent Irish ‘zombie’ movies, to allegorically address some of these tensions placed on the representations of farming in Ireland. Fears of impurity and disease are exacerbated by over-focusing on profit maximisation at all costs. Highlighting the horrors of zombie animals, much less the more pernicious dilemma of constantly increasing conspicuous consumption, remains at the centre of the zombie genre.<sup>24</sup> All the while acknowledging that the long term health and purity of our food systems are essential for human health and survival, never mind maintaining our “pure green” reputation and natural food branding. The relevance of this and the importance of high quality food production and consumption has been put into sharp relief by the likely zoonotic roots of the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>25</sup> Global citizens cannot presume farming and food production can be produced ever more cheaply, without considering the very real environmental consequences. The climate crisis remains the existential crisis of our time and a wake-up call for farmers and all citizens to realise the primary importance of the rural eco-systems for our very survival. To secure this radical transformation, a Just Transition is necessary to re-align agricultural business, practices and consumer expectations into the future.

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23 David Robbins, Diarmuid Torney, and Patrick Brereton, eds., *Ireland and the Climate Crisis* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

24 See also: John Quiggin, *Zombie Economics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

25 Zi-Wei Ye et al., “Zoonotic Origins of Human Coronaviruses,” *International Journal of Biological Sciences* 16, no. 10 (2020): 1686–97, <https://doi.org/10.7150/ijbs.45472>.including human beings, for thousands of years. Before 2003, two human CoVs (HCoV)

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22 John Barry, *Rethinking Green Politics: Nature, Virtue and Progress* (London: Sage, 1998), 257.

Global audiences as well as Irish citizens need to learn the real value of good quality food and agricultural output and not just embrace a ‘race to the bottom’, which in the long term is bad for all. The export model which Irish agriculture has adopted is always open to the vagaries of the international market and thus tends to generate inequalities. For a more sustainable future, not to mention a Just Transition, we need to re-purpose the industry, and support the long term sustainability of our farmers, as we simultaneously strive to meet our carbon budget. This demands that all stakeholders, including environmentalists, consumers, as well as the agri-food businesses, have to agree on an equitable and robust long-term strategy to help ensure a viable rural economy is supported and maintained. This process of transformation will be greatly assisted if politics and media move away from a confrontational populist model, with urban versus rural always put into conflict, or presenting the “environmental lobby” against “the farmer” – all of which are based on stark stereotypes that do not exist in reality and lead to entrenched positions rather than open and necessary dialogue. For an equitable Just Transition, we certainly need new ways of communicating the environmental challenge, without demonising and polarising farming and rural agents as against environmentalists and activists in the process.

As constantly highlighted, Ireland has to reverse the decades-long process of intensified agricultural policy which has encouraged farmers to grow their dairying and beef production sectors so as to become more commercial and ‘self-sustaining’. The threat of climate change in Ireland has focused on the farming industry as a major cause of excessive greenhouse gasses and like all commercial industries, it remains caught up in the irresolvable tensions between increasing overall outputs of food production and alternatively securing the land and our precious habitat for a more sustainable future. As elsewhere, Ireland needs more reflexive ‘creative imaginaries’, which can help to show the way, as the country strives to promote a radical low carbon energy future and an equitable road map for a Just Transition.

# The Human Right to a Just Wage in a Global and European Perspective

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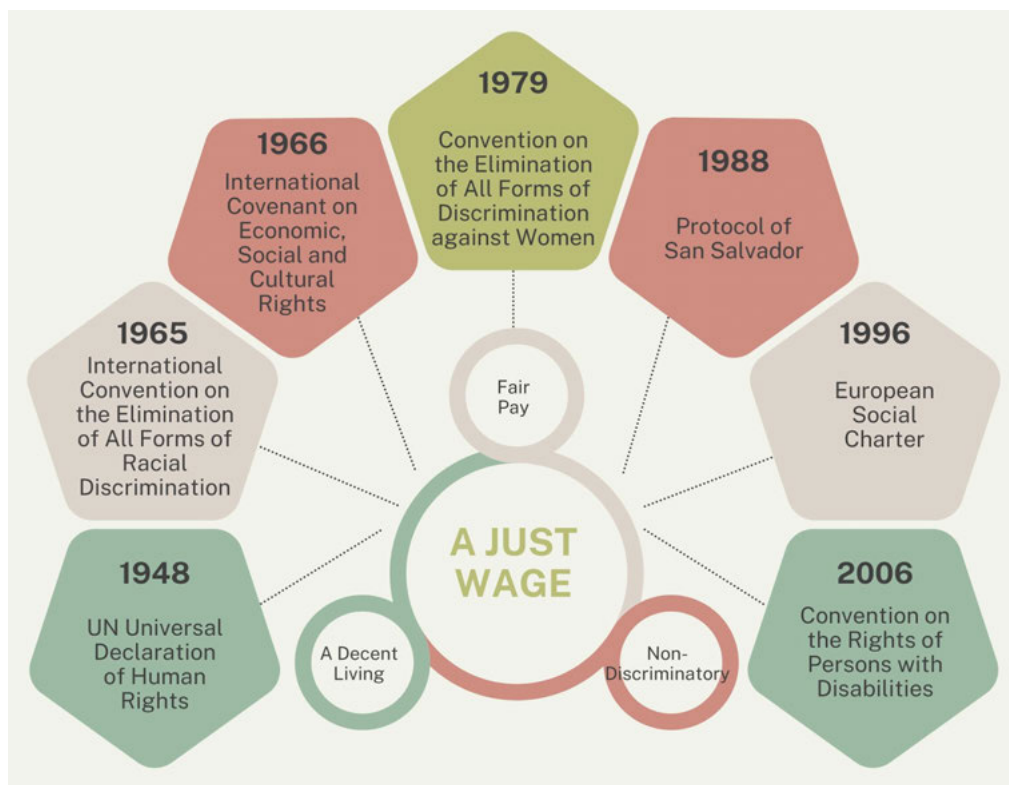


Figure 1: How the Just Wage relates to International Human Rights Conventions

## THE CORE DIMENSIONS OF THE RIGHT TO A JUST WAGE

The right to a just wage has formed part of the post-1945 development of international human rights from the very beginning. This notably becomes manifest in Article 23 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)<sup>2</sup> which guarantees everyone the right to work. This right specifically includes the “right to equal pay for equal work” (Article 23 para. 2 UDHR) as well as “the right to just and favourable remuneration ensuring for [everyone] and [everyone’s] family an existence worthy of human dignity, and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection” (Article 23 para. 3 UDHR). This provision is remarkable inasmuch as it already enunciates the three core dimensions of the right to a just wage that are still pertinent today, i.e. a remuneration that is (1) fair, (2) non-discriminatory (“equal pay for equal work”) and (3) that allows for a decent living (“existence worthy of human dignity”).

2 Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, Article 23.

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The right to a just wage has formed part of the post-1945 development of international human rights from the very beginning.

In spite of the prominence and authority of this text, the UDHR (as a resolution adopted by the UN General Assembly) remains non-binding.<sup>3</sup> Its content was, however, transposed into the legally binding 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR).<sup>4</sup> Pursuant to its Article 7, everyone’s right “to the enjoyment of just and favourable conditions of work” expressly includes “fair wages and equal remuneration for work of equal value without distinction of any kind, in particular women being guaranteed conditions of work not inferior to those enjoyed by men, with equal pay for equal

3 Relevant parts of the UDHR have, however, been transformed into customary international and are thus legally binding. This arguably also applies to the right to a just wage.

4 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of 1966.

work” as well as “a decent living for [workers] and their families”. Once again, it is not difficult to identify the three afore-mentioned core elements of the right to a just wage.

The same holds true for specialised universal human rights conventions such as the 1969 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination,<sup>5</sup> the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women,<sup>6</sup> and the 2006 Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.<sup>7</sup> In a similar vein, regional human rights conventions such as the 1996 (Revised) European Social Charter<sup>8</sup> and the 1988 Additional Protocol to the American Convention on Human Rights (the so-called “Protocol of San Salvador”)<sup>9</sup> provide for the aforementioned elements of the human rights to a just wage.

Hence, already at the level of legally binding human rights conventions, there exists a relatively homogeneous legal landscape with regard to what it means to pay employees a “just” remuneration. This is confirmed by the work of the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), a UN body composed of 18 independent experts and called to monitor the implementation of the ICESCR.<sup>10</sup> Notably by referring to Article 7 of the ICESCR, the CESCR has sought to further clarify the content of the right to a just wage in its General Comment No. 23 of 2016.<sup>11</sup> While General Comments are not legally binding,<sup>12</sup> they have to be seen as authoritative statements by the Committee on the meaning of the rights in the Covenant<sup>13</sup>:

5 International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination of 1965; see notably Article 5(e)(i).

6 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women of 1979; see notably Article 11(1)(d).

7 Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities of 2006; see notably Article 27(1)(b).

8 European Social Charter of 1996 (revised); see notably Article 4.

9 Additional Protocol to the American Convention on Human Rights in the Area of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights “Protocol of San Salvador” of 1988; see notably Article 7.

10 See Website of the United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner <<https://www.ohchr.org/en/treaty-bodies/cescr>> (2.10.2023).

11 CESCR, General Comment No. 23 (2016) on the right to just and favourable conditions of work (article 7 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights), E/C.12/GC/23, 27 April 2016.

12 See *Keller/Grover*, UN Human Rights Treaty Bodies: Law and Legitimacy, page 138; *Gerberl/Kyriakakis/O’Byrne*, General Comment 16 on State Obligations regarding the impact of the business sector on children’s rights: what is its standing, meaning and effect?, page 7.

13 See *Bontekas*, International human rights law and practice, 2020, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, para 5.4, page 213.

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Already at the level of legally binding human rights conventions, there exists a relatively homogeneous legal landscape with regard to what it means to pay employees a “just” remuneration.



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- 1) When explaining its view on what Article 7 of the ICESCR requires in the context of the right to a just wage, General Comment No. 23 uses the same threefold structure as described before.<sup>14</sup> In terms of “fair wages”,<sup>15</sup> it is stated that this notion is “not static, since it depends on a range of non-exhaustive objective criteria, reflecting not only the output of the work but also the responsibilities of the worker, the level of skill and education required to perform the work, the impact of the work on the health and safety of the worker, specific hardships related to the work and the impact on the worker’s personal and family life.”<sup>16</sup>
- 2) In the context of the requirement of “equal remuneration for work of equal value,” General Comment No. 23 emphasises that “equality applies to all workers without distinction based on race, ethnicity,

14 See CESCR, General Comment No. 23 (2016), para 9.

15 As a terminological clarification, the General Comment determines that the term «remuneration» goes beyond the more restricted notion of «wage» or «salary» to also include additional direct or indirect allowances in cash or in kind paid by the employer to the employee that should be of a fair and reasonable amount, such as grants, contributions to health insurance, housing and food allowances, and on-site affordable childcare facilities; see *ibid*, para 7.

16 *Ibid*, para 10.

nationality, migration or health status, disability, age, sexual orientation, gender identity or any other ground.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, this non-discrimination obligation also covers situations of indirect or de-facto discrimination as well as intersectional discrimination; for instance, a distinction between full-time and part-time work (such as the payment of bonuses only to full-time employees) might indirectly discriminate against women employees if a higher percentage of women are part-time workers.<sup>18</sup>

- 3) Regarding the third element, General Comment No. 23 states that while “fair wages and equal remuneration are determined by reference to the work performed by an individual worker, as well as in comparison with other workers, remuneration that provides a decent living must be determined by reference to outside factors such as the cost of living and other prevailing economic and social conditions”.<sup>19</sup> Thus, “remuneration must be sufficient to enable the worker and his or her family to enjoy other rights such as social security, health care, education and an adequate standard of living, including food, water and sanitation, housing, clothing and additional expenses such as commuting costs.”<sup>20</sup> This raises the issue of minimum wages which General Comment No. 23 deals with extensively.<sup>21</sup> In particular, the minimum wage should be recognised in legislation, fixed with reference to the requirements of a decent living, and applied consistently and systematically, protecting as much as possible the fullest range of workers, including workers in vulnerable situations.<sup>22</sup> It must be noted, that the minimum wage cannot be reduced under any circumstances by collective agreement or an individual contract.<sup>23</sup>

17 Ibid, para 11.

18 See *ibid*, para 13.

19 Ibid, para 18.

20 See *ibid*, para 18.

21 See *ibid*, paras 19 - 24.

22 See *ibid*, paras 21 and 23.

23 See *ibid*, para 19.

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Remuneration must be sufficient to enable the worker and his or her family to enjoy other rights such as social security, health care, education and an adequate standard of living, including food, water and sanitation, housing, clothing and additional expenses such as commuting costs.



Credit: Creative Commons: Pixabay, through pexels.com

The ICESCR is, however, not the only legal basis for a right to a just wage in international law. In particular, the International Labour Organization (ILO) in Geneva has long engaged in treaty-making in the field of labour rights which also includes the issue of just remuneration.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, the EU has developed the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) that sets out 20 principles in three areas which commit the member States to common minimum standards, including fair wages.<sup>25</sup> In terms of secondary legislation, of particular interest is the recent EU Directive on adequate minimum wages in the European Union.<sup>26</sup>

24 See in particular ILO Conventions: CO95 – Protection of Wages Conventions 1949 (No. 95), C100 – Equal Remuneration Convention 1951 (No. 100), C131 – Minimum Wage Fixing Convention 1970 (No. 131) and C173 – Protection of Workers’ Claims (Employer’s Insolvency) Convention 1992 (No. 173).

25 See Website of the European Commission <<https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1606&langId=en>> (2.10.2023).

26 Directive (EU) 2022/2041 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 October 2022 on adequate minimum wages in the European Union, OJ L 275, 25.10.2022, pages 33 – 47.



## PROGRESSIVE REALIZATION

While the content of the right to a just wage has been increasingly specified over the years, its implementation is subject to the so-called “progressive realization” clause. Pursuant to Article 2(1) ICESCR, “[e]ach State Party to the present Covenant undertakes to take steps, individually and through international assistance and co-operation, especially economic and technical, to the maximum of its available resources, with a view to achieving progressively the full realization of the rights recognized in the present Covenant by all appropriate means, including particularly the adoption of legislative measures.”<sup>27</sup>

This clause applies with respect to all economic and social rights (as opposed to civil and political rights) and acknowledges that the implementation of the former type of rights requires States to make available financial and other resources that are, by definition, limited. Against this background, States enjoy a certain margin of appreciation, when, by what means and how forcefully to implement the right to a just wage.

However, General Comment No. 23 clarifies that the progressive realization clause should not be used by States to justify inaction or selective implementation, but they must take “deliberate, concrete and targeted steps towards the progressive realization” of the right in question, “using maximum available resources.”<sup>28</sup> States must “move as expeditiously and effectively as possible towards the full implementation of the right.”<sup>29</sup>

In addition, States should avoid taking any deliberately retrogressive measures without careful consideration and justification. If retrogressive measures are introduced, for example in an economic crisis, States have to “demonstrate that such measures are temporary, necessary and non-

27 See, in a similar vein, Article 1 of the Protocol of San Salvador of 1988 (“Obligation to Adopt Measures”): “The States Parties to this Additional Protocol to the American Convention on Human Rights undertake to adopt the necessary measures, both domestically and through cooperation among states, especially economic and technical, to the extent allowed by their available resources, and taking into account their degree of development, for the purpose of achieving progressively and pursuant to their internal legislations, the full observance of the rights recognized in this Protocol.”

28 CESCR, General Comment No. 23 (2016), para 50.

29 Ibid, para 51.

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However, General Comment No. 23 clarifies that the progressive realization clause should not be used by States to justify inaction or selective implementation, but they must take “deliberate, concrete and targeted steps towards the progressive realization” of the right in question,

discriminatory”.<sup>30</sup> Finally, the measures taken must always respect minimum essential levels or “core obligations” that exist under the right to a just wage in the respective country, notably to put in place a comprehensive system to combat gender discrimination at work, including differences in remuneration, and to establish minimum wages that are non-discriminatory and non-derogable [not subject to any derogation or dilution, even in times of crisis], fixed by taking into consideration relevant economic factors and indexed to the cost of living so as to ensure a decent living for workers and their families.<sup>31</sup>

## IMPLEMENTATION GAPS WITH RESPECT TO STATES

As we have seen, in international law there indeed exists a binding right to a just wage with a specific content which serves as a legal benchmark for the acts (or omissions) of States. Yet, the problem often lies with the implementation and compliance mechanisms to enforce this right. In many cases, international law offers rather weak institutional arrangements to realise the rights it stipulates, especially when it comes to economic, social and cultural rights.

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In international law there indeed exists a binding right to a just wage.

30 Ibid, para 52.

31 See *ibid*, paras 52 and 65.

This particularly becomes manifest with the ICESCR: 171 out of the (almost) 200 States on the planet have ratified the treaty and thus formally promised to comply with the rights enshrined in the Covenant.<sup>32</sup> However, when it comes to the individual complaint procedure that is laid down in an optional (i.e. voluntary) protocol to the ICESCR<sup>33</sup> – and which authorises individuals or groups of individuals claiming to be victims of a violation of any of the economic, social and cultural rights set forth in the Covenant<sup>34</sup> – only 26 States<sup>35</sup> have so far committed themselves to open up this venue of implementation.



Credit: Creative Commons: Pixabay through pexels.com

The Covenant itself solely provides for a rather weak enforcement mechanism, i.e. the duty under Article 16 ICESCR to provide regular reports to the CESCR as an independent expert body, which can, however, only issue non-binding recommendations to the State in question.<sup>36</sup> To be sure, by also accepting so-called “shadow reports” from the civil society, the Committee will receive a more representative picture of the situation on the

ground and will be in a position to offer better advice to the affected country. Yet, the impact of the Committee’s intervention will often be limited to a “naming and shaming” exercise which will regularly not, or at least not directly, result in any change of the situation on the ground. This contrasts with General Comment No. 23’s claim that “[a]ny person who has experienced a violation of the right to just and favourable conditions of work [should] have access to effective judicial or other appropriate remedies, including adequate reparation, restitution, compensation, satisfaction or guarantees of non-repetition.”

## TARGETING EU BUSINESSES

In recent years, the systemic problems that exist with respect to assuring compliance of States with economic and social rights have helped to prompt initiatives that seek to focus more on a different set of actors that is equally crucial to the realisation of labour-related rights, i.e. business enterprises. Acknowledging that such rights cannot be realised without the involvement of the private sector, General Comment No. 23 expressly recognises the role of “non-State actors,” notably business enterprises in the implementation of the right to a just wage.<sup>37</sup>

Moreover, the last two decades have seen the emergence of various remarkable initiatives in this field. Arguably the most prominent among these initiatives are the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights,<sup>38</sup> the so-called “Ruggie Principles”, named after John Ruggie, a former Harvard University Professor, as the leading person behind them. These Principles (which are not legally binding<sup>39</sup>) emphasise business actors’ responsibility to respect human rights, including the right to a just wage, and to provide for compliance mechanisms adapted to the business world, notably due diligence obligations and human rights impact assessments.<sup>40</sup>

32 See <<https://indicators.ohchr.org/>> (2.10.2023).

33 Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of 10.12.2008.

34 See *ibid*, Article 2.

35 Out of which 20 are European and Latin American States <<https://indicators.ohchr.org/>> (2.10.2023).

36 See *Bantekas*, *International human rights law and practice*, 2020, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, para. 9.6.2, page 434; *Alston/Goodman*, *International human rights*, 2017, pages 286 and 287.

37 See General Comment No. 23 (2016), paras 51, 70 and 74.

38 *Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights*, Implementing the United Nations “Protect, Respect and Remedy” Framework (2011).

39 The *Guiding Principles* have, however, been formally endorsed by the UN Human Rights Council; see HRC Resolution 17/4 of 16 June 2011.

40 See *Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights*, Implementing the United Nations “Protect, Respect and Remedy” Framework (2011), pages 13 and 15.



Sweatshop in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Credit: Shutterstock 1843275577

It is interesting to see that more recent initiatives build upon this approach by seeking to impose (legally binding) due diligence obligations on corporations along the value chain, e.g. the French “*loi de vigilance*”,<sup>41</sup> the German Supply Chain Act,<sup>42</sup> the Irish Labour Exploitation and Trafficking Bill 2021<sup>43</sup> as well as the EU Commission’s 2022 proposal for a Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD).<sup>44</sup> The idea behind these legal acts is that – in order to internalise certain externalities of corporate action – the responsibility for the respect of human rights (as well as sustainability goals) should not only rest with the host-states of subsidiaries (typically in the Global South with sometimes deficient bureaucratic and enforcement structures), but also and in particular with the host-state of transnational corporations, typically headquartered in the Global North.<sup>45</sup>

Accordingly, the latter States should use their economic power to promote the respect of human rights along the whole value chain. Since all these legal acts and initiatives also cover the right to a just wage,<sup>46</sup> they may make a significant contribution to foster the respect of that right.

Yet, there exists a critical discourse with respect to such legal initiatives which should not be overlooked. While subscribing to their human rights agenda, notably Third World Approaches to International Law criticise the CSDDD project for its insensitivity with respect to colonial legacies and the perils of delocalised justice.<sup>47</sup> First, laws such as the CSDDD are made in the Global North, arguably for the benefit of the Global South, but with little input therefrom. Moreover, the EU’s engagement in its own corporate human rights’ due diligence project does not go hand in hand with EU support for the ongoing multilateral process for the adoption of a

41 See Loi n° 2017-399 du 27 mars 2017 relative au devoir de vigilance des sociétés mères et des entreprises donneuses d’ordre, Article 1.

42 See Gesetz über die unternehmerischen Sorgfaltspflichten zur Vermeidung von Menschenrechtsverletzungen in Lieferketten (LkSG) of 16.7.2021, § 3.

43 See Labour Exploitation and Trafficking (Audit of Supply Chains) Bill 2021, Bill 45 of 2021.

44 See European Commission, Proposal for a Directive on Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence of 23.2.2022, COM(2022) 71 final, page 4. The Directive will contribute to the European Pillar of Social Rights as both promote rights such as fair working conditions; see *ibid*, page 9 as well as recital 3 of the Directive.

45 For what concerns this «extraterritorial» application of human rights obligations; See notably General Comment No. 23, para 70.

46 See Loi n° 2017-399 du 27 mars 2017 relative au devoir de vigilance des sociétés mères et des entreprises donneuses d’ordre, Article 2; LkSG, § 2 (2) 3; Annex to the European Commission’s Proposal for a Directive on Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence, COM(2022) 71 final, para 7.

47 See with respect to the following notably Caroline Lichuma, Centering Europe and Othering the Rest: Corporate Due Diligence Laws and Their Impacts on the Global South, *Völkerrechtsblog*, 16.01.2023, <<https://voelkerrechtsblog.org/centering-europe-and-othering-the-rest/>> (2.10.2023).

binding treaty on business and human rights,<sup>48</sup> but rather substitutes for it. Finally, the EU's CSDDD takes litigation away from where the damage occurred in value chains and transfers it to courts in the Global North, thus "delocalizing" justice.

## CONCLUSION

As has been shown, the right to a just wage as well as its core elements (i.e. fair, non-discriminatory remuneration that allows for a decent living) are solidly entrenched in universal and regional human rights law. In particular, CESCR General Comment No. 23 of 2016 specifies the normative content of Article 7 of the ICESCR. While the right to a just wage as an economic and social right is subject to the progressive realisation clause and while States enjoy a certain margin of appreciation in implementing this right, the CESCR has clarified that this should not be used to justify inaction or selective implementation, but that States must take deliberate, concentered and targeted steps, using maximum available resources.

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Laws such as the CSDDD are made in the Global North, arguably for the benefit of the Global South, but with little input therefrom.

The situation is more fragile at the level of implementation and compliance mechanisms. The ICESCR solely offers weak institutional arrangements, mostly resulting in "naming and shaming" exercises, but not allowing to actually sanction States. Recent initiatives that focus more on (notably transnational) business enterprises which are equally crucial to the realisation of labour-related rights look more promising in this regard. By imposing legally binding due diligence obligations on corporations along the value chain they seek to internalise harmful externalities of corporate action. The EU Commission's CSDDD proposal is at the forefront of these initiatives. While welcomed by many, it is also criticised for being insensitive to colonial legacies and the perils of delocalised justice. The human right to a just wage thus remains in a precarious state.

<sup>48</sup> See Updated Draft Legally Binding Instrument to regulate, in international human rights law, the activities of transnational corporations and other business enterprises, 17.8.2021, <<https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/igwg-transcorp/session9/igwg-9th-updated-draft-lbi-clean.pdf>> accessed 2nd October 2023.

# “Sewing” Justice: A Theological Response to Garment Worker Exploitation

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## RESTLESS DISTRACTIONS

In his work *Confessions*, St. Augustine identifies a deep restlessness in every human heart. He insists that this restlessness finds its release in God;<sup>1</sup> advertisers insist that shopping is an effective alternative.

Consumers take their anxieties, sorrows, and boredom to the store—and shopping delivers them from emotional turmoil, if only for a moment. The term “retail therapy,” what North American theologian Michele Saracino calls the experiences of “feeling better about life” after shopping, holds weight in Western society.<sup>2</sup> A particularly bad day might warrant a quick look around in Penneys, or a purchase (or several) online—and so can a good day. Consumers turn to shopping, reflexively, to bond with friends, spend time with family, and entertain themselves.<sup>3</sup> Bustling shopping centres and city streets across the country reflect this trend.

If shopping is a social activity, what social consequences might it hold for us? At first glance, we might easily identify the social pressures knit into our purchasing practices. For younger people, the pressure to keep up with trends across Europe and North America is palpable. It is heightened through social media and advertising campaigns that create ideas of inclusion and belonging. Keeping up with new products and the rapidly evolving consumer landscape proves demanding, but necessary, as the things we buy hold social currency. Here, constant consumption becomes a social norm, with constant sale events and other advertisements reinforcing this norm.

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1 Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 1, 1.5.

2 Michele Saracino, *Clothing*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2012) p. 78.

3 Michelle A. Gonzalez, *Shopping: Christian Explorations of Daily Living* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2010), p. 14.

With this norm comes certain social expectations. We expect to update our wardrobes frequently, and we expect these updates to cost as little as possible. With apparel stores like SHEIN flooding the region with super-low prices, coupled with the reign of Penneys and Primark, we become accustomed to garments costing as little as a fiver. These prices are welcome, especially as costs of living—such as housing—rise. Yet these prices are sustained at great cost to industry workers, who are easily hidden from consumers’ view. In the frenzy to consume, what do we fail to see?

## [GARMENT] WORKER EXPLOITATION, CLOSE TO HOME

Worker exploitation is a spectre haunting numerous industries, including those in the global garment supply chain. Garment workers endure undignified working conditions—cramped workstations, exposure to pollutants, vermin, and disease—and are paid a pittance for their risky labour. Staring down monstrous quotas from demanding corporations, workers face further abuse from supervisors who are desperate to maintain favor with brands. In the desperation to complete orders, workers often undertake unpaid overtime and work 12-to-14 hour shifts.

Such circumstances are an open secret in our global society. We’ve heard of child labour in chocolate manufacturing, of suicidal Foxconn workers labouring to make our iPhones, and now, exhausted workers stitching our favorite garments together. Consumers are easily sympathetic to workers’ plight, but the complex scope of the industry—spread across various countries and transnational networks—makes it easier to disengage, as industry problems prove overwhelming to the average individual. Consumers may also be placated by the belief that these injustices occur at great distances, out of reach, too far removed from the act of purchasing, and thus of little consequence to them. Yet these injustices are not too far afield—we need only turn to the neighboring U.K. to encounter these conditions.



Image Credit: Public Domain through RawPixel.com (ID: 5904528)

Leicester is a city known for its garment production—and for its poor working conditions. As the main domestic hub for apparel production, Leicester’s factories have faced media scrutiny in the past decade. Since 2017, reporters have uncovered rampant worker exploitation throughout the city’s garment factories.<sup>4</sup> In 2018, the *Financial Times* published a report documenting numerous instances of wage injustice, finding that some garment workers earned as little as £3.50 an hour—less than half the U.K.’s minimum wage.<sup>5</sup> Working conditions have worsened since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Workers have been denied sick pay and leave amidst exploitative wages. Workers also noted a lack of mitigation measures within the factory, and coronavirus outbreaks were reportedly linked to these work places.<sup>6</sup>

This past October, 500 garment workers gathered in Leicester alongside trade unionists and other concerned citizens to protest these and other injustices in the city’s apparel

factories—the same factories where brands like New Look, Boohoo, and Missguided source products. This assembly was the first time that workers had rallied to publicly protest their situation.<sup>7</sup> Despite media pushback against exploitative conditions in the factory and by brands, workers continue to suffer. When brands have produced apology statements or pledge commitments to a “fairer industry,” they have later heightened their exploitative behaviors. In a current instance, sourcing brands have demanded price reductions on completed orders, straining Leicester’s garment industry and worsening conditions for garment workers. When we hear of injustice that occurs just out of reach, we tune out—but Leicester is a stone’s throw from Dublin. If such injustice happens in Leicester, it can happen in Limerick.

In Ireland, momentum is building around sustainability and ethical labour practices—for instance, the Labour Exploitation and Trafficking (Audit of Supply Chains) Bill, Ireland’s first legislation on regulating corporate activity related to labour exploitation and trafficking, is making its way

4 See Channel 4, “Undercover: Britain’s Cheap Clothes: Channel 4 Dispatches,” 23 January 2017. Web. <https://www.channel4.com/press/news/undercover-britains-cheap-clothes-channel-4-dispatches>

5 Sarah O’Connor, “Dark factories: labour exploitation in Britain’s garment industry.” *Financial Times*. 17 May 2018. Web. <https://www.ft.com/content/e427327e-5892-11e8-b8b2-d6ceb45fa9d0>

6 See Emma Elizabeth Davidson, “A new report claims Boohoo could be behind Leicester’s coronavirus surge.” *DAZED Digital*. 1 July 2020. Web. <https://www.dazeddigital.com/fashion/article/49690/1/new-report-fast-fashion-boohoo-leicester-garment-factories-coronavirus-rise>

7 See “PRESS RELEASE: LEICESTER GARMENT WORKERS RALLIED IN FIGHT FOR DECENT JOBS.” *Labour Behind the Label*. 1 October 2023. Web. <https://labourbehindthelabel.org/press-release-leicester-garment-workers-rallied-in-fight-for-decent-jobs/>



Garment Workers protest for just wages and decent conditions in Leicester. Credit: Reel News ([www.reelnews.org](http://www.reelnews.org))

through the Dáil Éireann for the second time.<sup>8</sup> Yet, simultaneously, the country is embracing questionable corporate investment. This past year, politicians welcomed the fast-fashion mega-giant SHEIN, who are establishing their Europe, Middle East, and Africa (EMEA) headquarters in Dublin City Centre.<sup>9</sup> SHEIN's reputation for worker exploitation and environmental harms within its supply chain is eclipsed by its shockingly low prices, which maintain consumer interest and popularity. Since 2022, the company has held successful pop-up shops from Cork to Dublin. They are enthusiastically embraced by consumers. And while some have been outspoken in their concerns about the mega-corporation's presence in the Republic, the promise of pretty clothes for dirt cheap wins out.<sup>10</sup>

A truthful reckoning with the injustice that is worker exploitation, within and beyond the apparel supply chain, in a way that produces

meaningful outcomes, is well overdue. What might compel consumers and policymakers alike to attend to these harms? The Catholic social tradition appeals to these pressing concerns, and makes a strong case for our communal involvement. I explore these insights below.

### INSIGHTS FROM THE CATHOLIC THEOLOGICAL TRADITION

What can the Catholic theological tradition tell us about worker injustice and workers' rights? The tradition boasts a lengthy history of labour-adjacent insights. Since Pope Leo XII promulgated *Rerum Novarum* (1891) – a papal encyclical responding to the changing labour conditions of the Industrial Revolution – the theological tradition has grown to consider the rights and dignity owed to the world's workers amidst economic growth, technological advancements, and globalised markets. Ninety years after *Rerum Novarum*, Pope John Paul II published *Laborem Exercens* (1981), or "Through Work", to address the labour landscape of the twentieth century. His work is worth revisiting here, not only for its pragmatic support for decent working conditions, but also for its emphasis on human dignity.

John Paul II reminds that before a person is a labourer, s/he is a human being who, by virtue of being human, has dignity. The Christian

8 See "Labour Exploitation and Trafficking (Audit of Supply Chains) Bill 2021, House of the Oireachtas, <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/bills/bill/2021/45/>. See also "Dáil Éireann debate - Thursday, 28 Sep 2023 Vol. 1043 No. 1" for current proceedings. <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/dail/2023-09-28/43/>

9 See "SHEIN Launches EMEA Headquarters in Dublin City," *IDA Ireland*. 11 May 2023. Web. <https://www.idaireland.com/latest-news/press-release/shein-launches-emea-headquarters-in-dublin-city/>

10 See, for instance, Amy Donohoe, "Why I decided against visiting SHEIN's pop-up shop in Dublin," *Irish Independent*, 7 November 2022, Web. <https://www.independent.ie/regionals/dublin/dublin-news/why-i-decided-against-visiting-sheins-pop-up-shop-in-dublin/42124753.html>. See also Amy Donohoe, "SHEIN pop-up store in Dublin should not be celebrated," *Irish Independent*, 20 October 2022. Web. <https://www.independent.ie/regionals/dublin/dublin-news/shein-pop-up-store-in-dublin-should-not-be-celebrated/42082735.html>



tradition holds that each person is created in the image and likeness of God (the *imago Dei*), reflecting the inviolable dignity of humanity. Northern Irish legal theorist Christopher McCrudden summarizes this formula aptly: “Value the human person for she is human.”<sup>11</sup> Human dignity is a central principle within Catholic social teaching.

Turning to the Gospels, John Paul II contends that we find a striking connection between human dignity and human labour. He notes that the Gospels depict a God who became like humanity in all ways, specifically by labouring: “the one who, while *being* God...devoted most of the years of his life on earth to *manual work* at the carpenter’s bench.”<sup>12</sup> This “Gospel of work” illustrates how, by channeling Christ’s labour on earth, our own labouring holds the possibility to enrich human dignity.

John Paul II asserts that work is a good—perhaps not always enjoyable, perhaps slightly inconvenient at times, perhaps requiring us to exert our bodies and minds, but good nonetheless—because it is a *worthy* undertaking. Work, for the Pope, is “something that corresponds to man’s dignity, that expresses this dignity and increases it.”<sup>13</sup> He further claims that work proves its goodness by enabling the labourer to achieve fulfillment as a human being, and thus “in a sense, becomes ‘more a human being.’”<sup>14</sup> Work enables us to transform God’s creation and creatures into new creations, ideas, and possibilities. At its best, it enables us to grow in self-understanding and thus, in dignity. So, if we follow John Paul II’s logic and recognise the linkage between work and personal dignity, then working conditions that threaten one’s dignity prompt ethical, spiritual, and even existential concerns.



Credit: Shutterstock ID 356760470

11 See Christopher McCrudden, “In Pursuit of Human Dignity: An Introduction to Current Debates,” in C. McCrudden, ed., *Understanding Human Dignity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 15-23.

12 Pope John Paul II, *L.E.*, §6 (emphasis original).

13 John Paul II, *L.E.*, 9. He also writes that “life is built up every day from work, from work it [human existence] derives its specific dignity...” See *LE*, §1.

14 *Ibid.*



John Paul II insists that “In work, whereby matter gains in nobility, man himself should not experience a lowering of his own dignity.” We can think of many such cases where consumable goods have “gained in nobility” at great expense to the labourers who produce them.

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John Paul II acknowledges, as Pope Leo XIII did, that work has two conditions: it is personal (reflected in how work allows for self-growth), and it is necessary. Work is what enables the person to “preserve his life” through wages.<sup>15</sup> The necessity of work is recognised by workers as well as employers, who use this vulnerability to impose unjust conditions and cut costs. Yet though every person is called to work, “work is ‘for man’ and not man ‘for work.’”<sup>16</sup> John Paul II insists that “In work, whereby matter gains in nobility, man himself should not experience a lowering of his own dignity.”<sup>17</sup> We can think of many such cases where consumable goods have “gained in nobility” at great expense to the labourers who produce them. In the case of fast fashion, cheap clothes are prioritised over garment workers’ dignity. Little thought is given to their fulfillment, nor their health or safety.

John Paul II’s insights also awaken us to the relationships we have forged through our clothes, and other products, allowing us to recognise our own participation in these injustices as consumers. Though distance may hide the faces of each garment worker, we wear the fruits of their labour, clothing, on our bodies. Traces of their handiwork are found in our bursting closets and stuffed homes. North American theologian Daniel K. Finn asserts, “When I bought the shirt that I am currently wearing, I entered into a preexisting relationship...I am indeed in relationship with the...woman who sewed the stitches into my shirt.”<sup>18</sup> Distance does not

erase our involvement in structures of sin; it only obscures it. Averting our eyes from instances of worker exploitation betrays our human neighbours who bear the image of God. Here, in action and commitment our society absconds the New Commandment: to love our (labouring) neighbour.

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## POLICY AND PRESCRIPTIONS FOR DIGNIFIED WORK

To honor the dignity owed to workers, the Catholic social tradition delineates other concepts and principles that secure this reality. These insights can guide consumer—and policy—responses to worker injustice, in the garment industry and beyond.

### Just Wage

The Catholic tradition holds that workers be granted a just wage. This just wage should foster the worker’s self-development, through adequate pay *and* time. The just wage stands in sharp contrast to the poor pay, wage theft, and forced overtime that define the working conditions in the apparel sector. Above all, a just wage should support the individual worker and their family—it should be generative, not exploitative.<sup>19</sup>

Though laws and business audits serve as methods of minimum wage enforcement, wage theft and exploitation still occur throughout the industry. In the cases in Leicester, brands have demanded discounts on previous orders.

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15 Pope Leo XIII, *R.N.*, §34.

16 John Paul II, *L.E.*, §6.

17 Cf. Pope Pius XI, Encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno*: AAS 23 (1931), pp. 221-222. Cited in *Ibid.*

18 Daniel K. Finn, “Social Causality and Market Complicity,” in *Distant Markets, Distant Harms: Economic Complicity and Christian Ethics*, edited by Daniel K. Finn, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 256-7.

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19 In his 1912 work *A Living Wage*, American priest-economist John A. Ryan wrote convincingly of a just wage as a “living wage.” Ryan insists that “The laborer has a right to a family Living wage because this is the only way in which he can exercise his right to the means of maintaining a family, and he has a right to these means because they are an essential condition of normal life.” Ryan, *A Living Wage* (London: Macmillan, 1912), 43.



Credit: Creative Commons: Joshua Santos, @hashtagsantos through pexels.com

With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, brands behaved similarly, and withheld worker pay en-masse for completed orders, to the tune of \$40 billion USD. Such behavior was enabled through *force majeure* clauses, which allowed brands to thwart moral responsibility to their supplying factories, for economic benefit.

Just wage is a heartening concept, but without enforcement mechanisms, it is dead in the water. Here, we are presented with an opportunity to turn to our labouring neighbours, and join them in solidarity—a force that has, and continues to, sow justice.

### Solidarity

In his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis acknowledges the cultures of indifference that permeates our world—and offers solidarity as an antidote.<sup>20</sup>

The principle of solidarity calls us to first face those suffering labourers, who are, despite distance, our neighbours, and eschew indifference. Solidarity starts with acknowledging their plight, and “comes to fulfillment only when I willingly place my life at the service of others.”<sup>21</sup> Francis writes that solidarity “finds concrete expression in service,”

20 Clemens Sedmak, *Enacting Catholic Social Tradition*, 49.

21 Benedict XVI, Address to the participants in the 14th session of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, Vatican website, May 3, 2008, [https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2008/may/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20080503\\_social-sciences.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2008/may/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20080503_social-sciences.html).

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whereby individuals learn to “set aside their own wishes and desires, their pursuit of power, before the concrete gaze of those who are most vulnerable.”<sup>22</sup> Solidarity must be more than committing a few good acts, and must not devolve into a charity side-project. Rather, it should prompt us to combat structural injustices, with worker voices at the forefront.

In 2020, consumers, journalists, and garment worker organisations pursued solidaristic action in response to the rampant industry wage theft. These groups joined together under the auspices of the #PayUp Campaign, and through protest campaigns, poor press, and communal efforts, secured over \$15 billion USD of owed wages for garment workers in South Asia.<sup>23</sup> Here, solidarity cut through corporate loopholes and held brands accountable for exploitation, while preserving workers’ agency.

22 Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, “On Fraternity and Social Friendship” (2020), §15. Cited in Sedmak, 49.

23 Brooke Bobb, “This Hashtag Unlocked \$15 billion of lost wages due to cancelled orders from Gap, Levi’s, and other brands.” *VOGUE*. 10 July 2020. Web. <https://www.vogue.com/article/remake-payup-campaign-social-media-garment-workers-wages-gap>

## CONCLUSION: POLICY PROMISES AND CONSUMER PRACTICES

What can garment worker solidarity look like for consumers and policymakers?

At present, momentum continues to build around just practices and policies in the garment supply chain. Binding agreements like the Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety and its sibling, the Pakistan Accord, hold promise to protect South Asian garment workers (though brands must be pressured to sign them).

Looking to Europe, Germany's supply chain due diligence act (*Lieferkettengesetz*)<sup>24</sup> has, since its enactment this January, created regular oversight and enforcement for German businesses, requiring them to reckon with any affronts to human rights in their supply chains.<sup>25</sup> Germany's bill can inspire EU-wide legislation, addressing concerns within and beyond the garment industry.

Organisations like Fashion Revolution, Labour Behind the Label, Clean Clothes Campaign, Fair Wear Foundation, and No Sweat UK provide avenues for advocacy and policy collaboration for consumers, union-adjacent professionals, and policymakers.<sup>26</sup> Local organisations like Fashion Revolution Ireland and IWW Ireland attend to labour initiatives in the country as well.<sup>27</sup>

Above all, when reckoning with worker exploitation we must think of the local and the global, and the responsibilities interwoven in the labor relationships forged across many kilometres. The Catholic social tradition offers us a framework through which we can assess these and other injustices. Our labouring neighbours in Leicester offer us the opportunity to join in support and fulfill the New Commandment: to love our (labouring) neighbour. Will we answer this call?

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<sup>24</sup> <https://lieferkettengesetz.de/en/>

<sup>25</sup> See "German supply chain law comes into force." *European Coalition for Corporate Justice*. 10 January 2023. Web. <https://corporatejustice.org/news/german-supply-chain-act-comes-into-force/>

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<sup>26</sup> These organisations can be found online at the following links: Fashion Revolution (<https://www.fashionrevolution.org/>), Labour Behind the Label (<https://labourbehindthelabel.org/>), Clean Clothes Campaign (<https://cleanclothes.org/>), Fair Wear Foundation (<https://www.fairwear.org/>), and No Sweat UK (<https://nosweat.org.uk/campaigns/>).

<sup>27</sup> These organisations can be found online at the following links: Fashion Revolution Ireland (<https://www.fashionrevolution.org/europe/ireland/>), and IWW Ireland (<https://www.onebigunion.ie/>).



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