

## AMERICAN JEWRY

OP-ED

On Labor Day, Jews should think about empowering working poor

Simon Greer

NEW YORK, Aug. 25 (JTA) — This Labor Day, you'll probably read about the troubles facing unions in America.

The recent split, in which several of the country's larger unions left the AFL-CIO, will dominate the headlines. It's being hailed by some as the movement's last best hope, and criticized by others as an untenable fracturing of a movement in need of solidarity.

Rarely do these discussions shed light on the lives of American workers, particularly low wage workers, who could benefit most from a strong labor movement.

The existence of the working poor is a stinging rebuke to those who blame poverty on the impoverished. The fact that most poor Americans are employed is clear evidence that the system is flawed.

Low-skilled jobs often pay poverty wages. It's a consequence of the marketplace, poor government regulation and the unequal bargaining power between workers and management.

But it's neither inevitable nor desirable.

A janitor in a commercial building in Texas cleans the floors, takes out the garbage, maintains the restrooms and does minor maintenance tasks. A janitor in a commercial building in New York performs the same tasks.

The janitor in Texas is poor and lacks private health insurance. She works three jobs and still needs public subsidies to make ends meet.

The janitor in New York is middle class, with quality employer-sponsored health insurance. She takes her family on vacation to Disney World every year.

The difference? The janitor in New York belongs to a union.

When learned Jews discuss tzedakah — or charity — and poverty, they inevitably reference Maimonides' eight levels of tzedakah, taken from the Mishneh Torah. The

highest level involves helping a person to become self-sufficient, possibly by giving him a job or a loan to start a business. In popular parlance, “Give a man a fish and he eats for a day; teach a man to fish and he eats for life.”

Maimonides’ formulation posits that employment equals self-sufficiency. This presumes that people who work can live off of their earnings.

In the United States, 7.4 million working Americans earn less than the federal poverty level. Three out of five of these men and women work full time. Sixty-five percent of poor families include at least one working parent.

The numbers look even worse considering that the federal poverty level in 2004 was set at \$15,670 per year for a family of three. Millions of workers who earn over the official poverty line remain impoverished, if not officially poor.

So how can we fulfill the eighth level of tzedakah for the working poor? We can build a society that creates the conditions in which employment enables workers to achieve self-sufficiency.

Today, there are few public programs to help poor workers become economically self-sufficient.

Education and training can help. So does the earned income tax credit. The minimum wage helps. A living wage helps even more.

But enabling workers to bargain collectively with their employers provides the best model of self-sufficiency.

This Labor Day, let us give thanks to unions for creating the weekend and ending child labor in the United States. But let us continue to see them as a vehicle through which to fulfill our obligation to engage in tzedakah at the highest level.

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