



Labor in the United States

What do we mean by labor?

Labor is most often used to refer to work-for-wages, where the worker does not own the end-product of their work. Traditionally, labor refers to the trades and physical laborers. Today it is used to refer to all forms of work.

How do we measure labor?

In the United States, the last annual report stated that 63% of the population age 16 and older were participating in the labor force. This included the 58% that were employed, at least part time, as well as the 7% that were unemployed. That leaves 27% of the adult population, retired or disabled, out of the labor market entirely.

Pope Francis on National Responsibility

"States must ensure that their own legislation truly respects the dignity of the human person in the areas of migration, employment, adoption, the movement of businesses offshore and the sale of items produced by slave labour. There is a need for just laws which are centred on the human person, uphold fundamental rights and restore those rights when they have been violated."

~ Pope Francis 2015

What is a minimum wage?

Since the end of the Great Depression, there has been a federally mandated minimum wage, a base amount a worker is calculated to need to earn to survive. However, this wage has not been adjusted to meet the rising cost of living.

Currently, the \$7.25 federal minimum wage is held to be insufficient. There is discussion of raising this federal standard. In the meantime, many states and cities have already done so. Illinois currently has a minimum wage of 8.25 an hour. The city of Chicago just passed a graduated minimum wage increase bill that will see wages rising from the state minimum to \$13 an hour over the next five years (http://www.cityofchicago.org/city/en/depts/mayor/supp_info/)

What is "Right-to-Work"?

Right to work is a name for policies that are used to strip labor unions of a lot of their collective organizing power. Framed as a "freedom from compulsory unionism," there are 25 right to work states at the moment. Workers in "right-to-work" states make on average \$1500 less. Additionally, health benefits and education subsidization becomes harder to access.

(Economic Policy Institute Reports)

Unions -

Unions are a way to organize the labor force and advocate for policies and legislation on behalf of workers. In 2014, according to the BLS, union membership was 11% of the labor force, and over 16 million people were represented by unions.

Union membership and share of income going to the top 10%



Sources: U.S. Census Bureau and Piketty and Saez (2013)

Is there anything I can do?

- **Learn** – Take a class. Attend a guest lecture. Talk with a professor. Read. Research.
- **Act** – Get involved with co-curricular organizations. Form a discussion group. Talk to your elected representatives. Serve in the community.
- **Reflect** – No matter your faith background and identity, put your intentions for the world, its people, and its resources in your prayer and reflections.

Resources

US Bureau of Labor Statistics
<http://www.bls.gov/home.htm>

Economic Policy Institute
www.epi.org/

AFLCIO -
<http://www.aflcio.org/>

For more on social justice, visit Loyola's Social Justice Web Portal at luc.edu/socialjustice