

and Jewish Traditions

“In the organization of workers for the purpose of protecting their working conditions, there is an element of justice and tikkun olam. Unorganized labor works for lower wages and longer hours, and this is thus to the detriment of the working conditions of the organized worker and causes him economic loss. Such losses can be claimed through a lawsuit, and therefore both the employer and the unorganized worker can be summoned to a beit din...”

Rabbi Avraham Isaac Kook, 1933

“So we find at various stages of Jewish history examples of such organizations covering many different types of artisans and workers. In Talmudic times, there are references to organizations of weavers and dyers, bakers, drivers and sailors....In Jerusalem during Temple times, there existed special synagogues for each trade and craft, while in Alexandria special sections were reserved in the Great Synagogue for different types of workers...”

With All Your Possessions: Jewish Ethics and Economic Life, by Meir Tamari

“The Jewish community in the United States has been supportive of worker and trade union rights for many years, even as it evolved from a predominantly working-class community in the first part of the century to a collective memory of an earlier period of mass Jewish immigration to the United States, when an overwhelmingly immigrant community toiled in difficult and often desperate conditions in the garment industry and other trades....”

Labor Rights in the Jewish Tradition, by Michael S. Perry

“You shall not abuse a needy and destitute laborer, whether a fellow countryman or a stranger in one of the communities of your land. You must pay him his wages on the same day, before the sun sets, for he is needy and urgently depends upon it.”

Deuteronomy 24:14,15

“The Torah includes four negative precepts and one positive commandment enjoining the prompt payment of wages. Though they were originally phrased in terms of a daily wage, they embrace weekly and monthly payments as these become prevalent....In addition to monetary wages, remuneration can also take the form of nonfinancial benefits accruing to a worker through his working conditions and fringe benefits. Important as they were in early periods of Jewish history, such benefits would seem to be of greater importance today....Halakhic sources see the accepted fringe benefits prevalent to a given time or place, or in a given industry, as having the legal status of part of the total reimbursement of the employee.... Regarding hours of employment, the same source tells us that ‘one cannot compel his employees to come earlier or depart later than is customary at that place.’ ”

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“He who withholds an employee’s wages is as though he deprived him of his life.”

Baba Metzia 111a

“A handmill or an upper millstone [one’s means of livelihood] shall not be taken in pawn, for that would be taking someone’s life in pawn.”

Deuteronomy 24:6