
Social Justice:
Labor Rights in Islam

By Sh. Abdool Rahman Khan

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About ICNA

Established in 1968, the Islamic Circle of North America was a response to the growing need for a supportive Muslim community in North America. The organization initially focused on educating its growing membership about Islam, the goal being to adhere to Islamic values amongst a religiously diverse community. In the early 70s, ICNA members, the majority of whom were of South Asian descent, focused their efforts on education and personal/spiritual development.

In November of 1977, nearly a decade after its formation, ICNA members met and discussed the need for Islamic work based in North America. After drafting and adopting a new detailed constitution, the organization formally became known as the Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA). With a new name and new direction, members of ICNA were determined to become an inclusive, diverse organization, and adopted English as their official language. ICNA's work towards establishing a place for Islam in America began.

With the 80s came several key expansion projects—ICNA Sisters' Wing was formed in 1980, ICNA's main headquarters established in Jamaica, Queens in 1984 and the annual convention celebrated its 10th year in 1985. With a central location from which to base its efforts, ICNA was able to launch numerous projects, many of which still thrive today. ICNA Relief, 877-Why Islam, Young Muslims, the National Shura Council, the Message International, Muslim Alert Network, Muslim Savings and Investments (MSI) and more branches were formed throughout the following years to cater to the needs of the American Muslim community. Along with the national convention, clusters of ICNA chapters across North America hosted annual regional conferences; Neighbor Nets were formed for members of local chapters to meet on a consistent basis. 1993 marked a milestone in ICNA's history, as its Charter and By-Laws were approved and adopted.

In the past decade, ICNA has expanded its reach across the US while maintaining an active presence in local communities. Muslim Family Day, first hosted at Six Flags New Jersey in the year 2000, now attracts nearly 50,000 a year at several parks nationwide. The ICNA Council for Social Justice, a branch of ICNA dedicated to representing the Muslim voice on matters of social justice was formed in 2009. ICNA has worked to establish connections between Islam and the public, collaborating with numerous Muslim organizations to reach this end. ICNA also works closely with many national interfaith organizations for the betterment of society. By focusing on self-development, education, outreach and social services, ICNA has cemented its place as a leading grassroots organization in the American Muslim community.

ABOUT ICNA COUNCIL FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

ICNA Council for Social Justice (CSJ) is a social justice/human rights organization that strives to systematically facilitate assertive Muslim involvement in the field of human struggle for the rights of the poor and oppressed in the United States. Established by the Islamic Circle of North America, CSJ enters the social justice/human rights arena in America to cooperate with existing social justice efforts, and organize new initiatives when appropriate, to eliminate barriers to full citizenship rights and privileges, work to restore civil liberties required for a democratic society, and raise public awareness and work to remove the gross inequities of the US criminal justice system.

The mission of all of the Prophets, including the Prophet Muhammad ibn Abdullah (peace be upon him), was to elevate human existence and establish unparalleled just societies through submission to the Creator.

“Oh you who believe! Be standard bearers for Justice, as witnesses to Allah, even as against yourselves, or your parents, Or your kin, whether it be rich or poor; For Allah can best protect both. Follow not the lusts, lest you Swerve, and if you Distort Justice or decline To do Justice, verily Allah is well-Acquainted with all that you do.” Qur’an 4:135

Sh. Abdool Rahman Khan



Sh. Abdool Rahman Khan is a graduate of the Islamic University of Medina from the faculty of Shari'ah (Islamic Jurisprudence) specializing in Islamic Inheritance. He is a former Principal of the Guyana Islamic Institute and also of Al-Rahmah School, Baltimore, Maryland. Shaykh Abdool Rahman served as the Resident Scholar and Khateeb (lecturer) at Islamic Foundation, Villa Park, Chicago, Illinois. He is actively involved in the field of religious dialog and social issues. He is the chairman of the Shari'ah Council of Islamic Circle of North America and a member of the Fiqh Council of North America.

ICNA Council for Social Justice

Labor Rights in Islam

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Introduction

In Islam, labor is considered a virtuous deed and obligatory upon all able bodied person in society. Man has many needs to fulfill: food, water, clothing, shelter, medicine, education etc. and since he is required to fulfill these needs for himself and his family through lawful means, he is obliged to work. So while work is mandatory, begging is highly discouraged unless extremely necessary. From this understanding, work to provide sustenance for oneself and one's family is considered as an act of worship. This can be illustrated by the following incident:

Once the Prophet (PBUH) was sitting with his companions and they happened to see a young man busy working in the early hours of the morning. The companions watched him and commented on how beneficial it would be if he put his effort in worshipping Allah (S.W.T.) instead. When he heard this, the Holy Prophet (PBUH) said to them:” Do not say that! Because if he is working to be independent and self-sufficient, it is in the way of Allah (S.W.T.). Even if he were striving to earn a living in order to support his family, it would still be a noble act. It is only when a person takes pride in his efforts and money that he is working in way of Shaitan.

Also, ‘Aaishah (Prophet`s wife) said: “The Prophet’s companions worked hard to support themselves.”

Umar ibn-ul-Khattab, the second caliph of Islam, said: “Let not one of you sit in his house rather than actively seeking sustenance saying: ‘O God provide for me.’ When you know quite well that the sky does not rain gold and silver.”

From this we learn the importance of work in Islam and it is highly

encouraged in order to promote growth in society. At the same time, it has instituted laws to manage workers and prevent them from being abused or exploited.

Long before trade unions or labor unions were even dreamed to be in existence, Islam made a clear path forward of what workers' rights are and how they are to be fulfilled and protected. Notably, by fulfilling these rights, one serves The Creator because these rights are given to us by The Creator Himself and explained to us by His Final messenger Muhammad (PBUH). We see our rights through the guidance God Almighty.

These rights are only manifestations of belief in The One God who created man at all levels and tests them through their behavior. God Almighty does not want His creation to be exploited or abused. Hence, He through His Final Messenger to mankind has informed us that exploitation and injustice must not be practiced. Instead, fair treatment and justice must be the basis for all human relations.

Allah Almighty says in the Quran as translated:

“Do they distribute the mercy of your Lord? It is We who have apportioned among them their livelihood in the life of this world and have raised some of them above others in degrees [of rank] that they may make use of one another for service. But the mercy of your Lord is better than whatever they accumulate.” [Az-Zukhruf 43:32]

Finally, mankind will be gathered back unto his Lord and will be questioned if he violated the rights of God's creation and particularly his fellow human beings. Thus, workers must be treated with dignity and honor regardless of the kind of work they are performing, as long as this work is lawful.

The Prophet (PBUH) said: “He upon whom his brother has a right, be it of the nature of money or honor, let him compensate for it before he is made to compensate for it on a day when there will

be neither dinar nor dirham to deal with. Instead, if he has a good deed in his account it will be taken away from him and given to the person he had wronged. And if he has no good deeds in his account, sins of the other person will be taken from him and added to his account” (al-Bukhari).

Islamic Labor Rights Related to Employer-Employee Relationship

The first discourse is what should be the relationship between the employer and employee? Yes, one does the work and the other pays, but is it just this simple mechanical process? Or is there something more than work and money?

The Prophet of Islam (PBUH) answered this for us in both words and deeds.

He infused justice, love, and dignity in all those around him. He spread the power of brotherhood and wanted employers to respect their employees on the footing of brotherhood. He worked both as an employer and as an employee.

As an employee, he worked as a shepherd in his early years and then went onto become a successful businessman. He performed each duty with the highest standards of discipline and trust. Suffice to say that all of this happened long before his prophethood.

As an employer, he used to sit on the floor and eat with his servant boy Anas ibn Malik, who served him for ten years. Anas is reported to have said that the Prophet (PBUH) never rebuked him for anything: “When I did something, he never questioned my manner of doing it; and when I did not do something, he never questioned my failure to do it. He was the most good-natured of all men.”

The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is reported to have said: Your employees are your brothers upon whom Allah has given you authority, so if a Muslim has another person under his control, he/she should feed them with the like of what one eats and clothe

them with the like of what one wears and you should not overburden them with what they cannot bear and if you do so, help them in their jobs.

Abu Huraira reported that the Messenger of Allah (PBUH) said, “Someone who eats with his servant, rides a donkey in the markets, and ties up his sheep and milks it is not proud.”

From this guidance, the Prophet (PBUH) emphasized that at the end of the day this employee happens to be your brother in humanity, your brother in faith and should be treated with respect. Employers and employees all must be honest and must deal with each other justly and with respect.

Disrespect in today’s world is the greatest dishonor done to employees and this opens the door to abuse and exploitation. A relationship of employer-employee based on brotherhood will bring out the best of both parties. Employees treated with respect and dignity will generally work very hard with diligence and honesty. It is a win-win situation. While the opposite is also true: an employer who is rude and disrespectful to his employees will tend not to get the best of them and in fact they would try to “get back” at their employer which causes harm to both.

Islamic Labor Rights Related to Compensation

In Islam, appropriate compensation must be given to the work done. Abu Sa’eed Al-Khudri narrated that the Prophet (PBUH), said: “Whoever employs someone to work for him, he must specify for him his wage in advance.” [‘Abdur-Razzaaq]

It is very un-Islamic for a person to work another human being and at the end pay him little or no wage. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) warned in a Hadith Qudsi in which Allah Almighty said: ‘I will be an opponent to three types of people on the Day of Resurrection: one who makes a covenant in My name but proves treach-

erous; one who sells a free person and eats his price; and one who employs a worker and takes full work from him but does not pay him for his labor” (Al-Bukhari).

Stories can fill volumes how immigrant workers are being exploited by rich nations and multi-billion dollar companies across the globe. In some countries workers are not even given their wages for months while the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) warned:

“You should pay the laborer his wages before his sweat dries” (Sunan Ibn Mâjah (2443)). This hadith is quite clear and self-explanatory; workers are to be paid on time. If a person is hired to do a job, he should be paid immediately. However, if there is a contractual agreement that wages are to be paid weekly or monthly, then this is what must be done. The Prophet of Islam (PBUH) said: “The procrastination of the rich is [a form of] oppression.” He (PBUH) also said: “Whoever oppressed another for a hand span measure of land will have a collar of seven lands placed around his neck on the Day of Judgment.”

There should also be an agreement of what the compensation would be and both sides must fulfill their portion of the contract. We must keep in mind that just because a worker agrees to be paid \$0.10 cents an hour for a job does not mean that an agreement has been reached. Rather, this is gross exploitation and often a result of poverty where people have no choice but to work under tremendous strain to put a morsel of food on the table for their families, while those who exploit them rake in billions of dollars in their coffers. In Islam, justice and fair dealing are to be upheld at all times and places.

Allah says in the Qur’an as translated: “Fulfill the measure and weight and do not deprive people of their due and cause not corruption upon the earth after its reformation.” (Al-A`raf 7:85)

Islamic Labor Rights Related to Having the Right to Rest

Workers should not be overburdened and overwhelmed with work.

They have the right to have both physical and mental rest. They are also to be given time to offer their prayers. Indeed, when workers know that they fulfill their rights to their Creator they will be more enthused to perform their work with higher efficiency. Again, it is win-win for the employer and the employee.

At the same time, workers should have time for themselves and their families. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) generally spoke about giving the body its share of rest by saying “and your body and your family have a right on you” (Al-Bukhari). Then when a person becomes too old to work, he must be compensated. Old age pension was implemented by the Second Caliph Umar who said: “It is far from being humane to let one go helpless in old age after getting service from him in his youth”.

The Prophet (PBUH) also said, “Whoever lightens the work of his workers will have the reward on his scales.” In the labor force, unfortunately, there are places where whips are on the backs if they were to take a rest. Not to mention the horrors of child labor in so many countries. They are forced to work under hazardous conditions when at such a tender age, they should be playing or going to school. If this is not a curse to society and a crime against humanity then what is?

Conclusion

Fairness and justice towards workers is a noble cause and an act that leads to success and salvation. One of the stories that the Prophet (PBUH) mentioned about the previous nations included the following:

“While three persons were traveling, they were overtaken by rain and they took shelter in a cave in a mountain. A big rock fell from the mountain over the mouth of the cave and blocked it. They said to each other: “Think of such righteous deeds which you did for Allah’s sake only, and invoke Allah by mentioning those deeds so

that Allah may relieve you from your difficulty.’ One of them said, ‘O Allah! I employed a laborer for wages equal to a faraq (a certain measure) of rice, and when he had finished his job he demanded his wages, but when I presented his due to him, he gave it up and refused to take it. Then I kept on sowing that rice for him (several times) until I managed to buy, with the price of the yield, some cows and their shepherd. Later on the laborer came back to me and said: ‘Be afraid of Allah, and do not be unjust to me and give me my due.’

I said to him: Go and take those cows and their shepherd. So he took them and went away. If You considered that I had done that for seeking Your pleasure, then please remove the remaining part of the rock. And the rock was shifted. ... and each one mentioned a good deed until they were freed” [al-Bukhari].

If employers followed these simple guidance that Islam had given over 14 centuries ago, the world of labor would be given their full rights and respect and in turn they will produce way beyond their call of duty. The worker will know that his employer is not seeking to exploit him and the employer will know that he has God-fearing workers who are honest and strive to do their best. Such an environment must be created for both the employer and the employee in order to succeed.

