

Foreword



Brian Duss

All workers should benefit when the economy is strong. “A rising tide lifts all boats” is how it used to be put. Based on what we’re seeing now, this upbeat message is at risk of sounding like an anachronism. Since coming out of recession in 2001, the U.S. economy has been surging at some of the highest levels of economic growth in decades. High-income earners have done extremely well, but low-wage workers are losing ground.

More than 40 million workers hold low-wage jobs. For low-wage workers—clerks, cashiers, food servers, daycare providers, retail workers, security guards, housekeepers, groundskeepers and others who also help to keep this economy running—wages have been eroding steadily since long before the start of this decade. When adjusted for inflation, low-wage work pays less today than in the 1970s. Economists studying the problem have offered business leaders, policymakers and citizens a bounty of solutions. But our nation has not done enough to stop the long-term decline in the real wages of many working people.

In 2007, federal policymakers raised the national minimum wage for the first time in a decade. This will help low-wage workers, but it only begins to address the challenges faced by families who struggle to support themselves with these kinds of jobs. Low-wage work pays so poorly that a full-time job can leave a family of three struggling to put food on the table. Plus, low-wage jobs often do not include employer-sponsored health insurance or paid sick days or other benefits that most middle-income workers take for granted.

If you believe, as I do, that strong families are vitally important to society, then we must all be concerned about the inadequacy of low-wage jobs. All families should be able to earn enough to meet basic living expenses like food, shelter, transportation and out-of-pocket healthcare costs. A health crisis or divorce can push families into hunger and poverty. In fact, most people in this country fall into poverty at some point in their lives.

In this report we take on the questions of why many people who work continue to live in or near poverty, what barriers they face and what policy changes are needed to make it possible for working people to move out of poverty.

Bread for the World Institute has focused heavily on strengthening the national nutrition programs because increasing nutrition assistance is the fastest, most direct way to reduce hunger in the United States. But broader measures to reduce poverty and economic vulnerability are also necessary. Who wouldn’t agree the best and most durable solution to hunger should be a job that allows a family to feed itself?

It says in the Bible, “If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat.” The corollary is that all who work should be able to eat. And that is not the case in our society.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "David Beckmann". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Rev. David Beckmann
President, Bread for the World and Bread for the World Institute