

Odds stacked against them, cab drivers fight for just wages

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Nashville, is daunting for Essoumon, who has been a taxi driver here for two years.

The challenges he faces to make a living, including working long hours with no minimum wage guarantee, are shared by many of the 700 cab drivers in Nashville. He and his fellow drivers are now trying to raise a unified voice for more just wages and working conditions in their industry.

Essoumon rarely has 24 hours off to spend with his family, and most of the time when he sees his daughter she's sleeping. He tries to attend Mass at St. Edward Church every Sunday, but sometimes he has to work instead. "It's really sad but that's the truth about cab drivers," he said.

Essoumon continues to work as a cab driver because of the flexibility it offers when he plans to go back to school, he said. With a background in finance and experience working for a human rights organization in Ivory Coast, he is considering studying to be an accountant at Middle Tennessee State University or a nurse at Aquinas College.

Many of the taxi drivers in Nashville are legal immigrants from Africa and the Middle East, using the job as a stepping stone toward achieving the "American dream." However, it is a dream that will likely remain out of reach for them.

'Indentured servitude'

"This is an industry that sustains poverty," said Megan Macaraeg, director of the local chapter of the non-profit labor rights organization Jobs with Justice. For taxi drivers, she said, "it's virtually impossible to work their way into having savings."

Cab drivers in Nashville work for one



Photo by Theresa Laurence

Edourd Essoumon, originally from Ivory Coast, has been a taxi driver in Nashville for two years. The St. Edward parishioner is joining together with other drivers in the city to leverage for better wages and working conditions. He sometimes works 18 hour days and rarely has 24 hours off to spend with his wife and young daughter.

of six taxi companies as independent contractors. With this arrangement, they must rely solely on their passengers' fare and tips for their earnings.

The drivers, whether they rent their vehicle or, like Essoumon, own it, are responsible for all maintenance, insurance and gas costs. They must also pay about \$175 a week to the cab companies for the right to operate as a licensed taxi driver and take advantage of company advertising and dispatching services.

With all of the costs and fees the drivers have to shoulder, they typically start out the day \$100 in debt, Macaraeg said. "How can we describe that as anything

other than indentured servitude?"

The drivers typically work 12 hours or more a day, and do not receive paid vacation or sick days. "Sometimes I even work 18 hours a day," Essoumon said. "I don't feel like I have a choice. I have to pay the taxi owners, for my house and gas."

Attempts to reach a spokesperson at Checker Cab Co. by press time were unsuccessful.

'Not very attractive options'

Essoumon and his fellow taxi drivers, with help from Jobs with Justice, are organizing to negotiate for better wages and working conditions. One of their

chief complaints is the high "weekly lick" fee they have to pay to the companies; they would like to see the local government step in and regulate it. However, the Metro Transportation and Licensing Commission does not have the authority to intervene in driver-company disputes.

Drivers and organizers are looking to other cities as models for a better taxi system here. One option might be for the drivers to rent their licensing number straight from the city, but according to Commission Director Brian McQuiston, "that would be a tremendous restructuring effort," and not one that currently is being considered.

The drivers' efforts to have any collective bargaining power with the cab companies might fall flat as well, McQuiston said. "That's a problem for them as independent contractors."

While the discontented cab drivers could feasibly form their own company, they might not be granted a permit by the Commission, which grants licenses based on public need. "Right now there are a lot of cabs on the street, and adding another cab company would create more competition," McQuiston said. The cab drivers, he said, are faced with "not very attractive options."

But drivers and organizers are not giving up. Jobs with Justice staff and volunteers are currently working to survey all the drivers to find out more about their working conditions, daily expenses and earnings and other issues.

"We want a really strong tool to show what the taxi driver's life is like," said Juliana Cabrales with Jobs with Justice. Once all the results are compiled and analyzed "we hope it will help leverage in the fight to make changes," she said.

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Congregations hope to build support for living wage

ANDY TELLI

Convincing people that all full-time employees should receive a living wage can be difficult, admits Father Steve Wolf, pastor of St. Stephen Catholic Community in Old Hickory. But it is a moral issue that he is committed to.

"It's one of those things if it were to happen, a lot of the poverty that exists in the United States would not exist," Father Wolf said. "There's always going to be poverty and suffering in the world, but there's a lot of suffering out there that doesn't have to happen. People not making a living wage is a suffering that doesn't have to happen."

Father Wolf hosted a recent meeting of Congregations Offering a Living Wage at the Cathedral of the Incarnation in Nashville. It is an organization of churches of various denominations, including 14 parishes in the Diocese of Nashville, that have committed to pay all of their own employees a minimum of a living wage.

The living wage is the amount calculated to be enough for a family of four with two working adults to afford the basic necessities. While the federal minimum wage is scheduled to increase from \$5.85 an hour to \$6.55 per hour on July 24, economists have calculated the living wage in Nashville to be \$10.19 per hour.

The representatives from several Nashville area churches heard from the Rev. Rebekah Jordan, a Methodist minister who helped lead a successful three-year campaign to convince the City of Mem-

phis to adopt a living wage for all its employees, the employees of its service contractors, and the employees of the companies that receive tax breaks from the city.

"We had to have a coalition that was broad and deep," said the Rev. Jordan, who is the founder and executive director of Workers Interfaith Network in Memphis.

Faith communities and their leaders played an important role in the coalition, the Rev. Jordan explained. When delegations from the coalition, which also included labor unions and community groups, would meet with city council members and other officials, they would always include a faith leader who would talk about the moral reasons for paying a living wage, she said.

And faith communities were an important source of volunteers and others willing to participate in the coalition's public lobbying events, the Rev. Jordan said.

The Congregations Offering a Living Wage was born from a failed effort in 2003 to get the Metro Nashville government to adopt a living wage for all of its employees. Several faith leaders involved in that effort decided to press the city's churches and religious congregations to pay their own employees a living wage, explained the Rev. Bill Barnes, a Methodist minister and a member of the group.

"The idea was if we could establish a critical mass of congregations offering a living wage, we could move on to other institutions," such as universities, religious schools, governments, and others, the

Rev. Barnes explained.

"You will always have people doing a foundational level of work," such as day care workers, some clerical work, janitorial work, Father Wolf said. "They ought to be paid enough to pay for their basic needs."

One child in five in the United States is growing up in poverty, Father Wolf said. A vast majority of them live in a household with at least one adult working full-time.

"We have one child in five living in poverty and we're not going to do anything about it?" Father Wolf said. "That's a moral issue."

During his 14 years working as a certified public accountant before he entered the seminary, Father Wolf said, he often helped families with their personal finances and even co-wrote a book about the subject. In family after family, he said, both spouses were working and they still couldn't meet the basic needs of their children.

"I also think a living wage is good for the soul of the employer," Father Wolf said. People who aren't paid enough to meet their basic needs ultimately must rely on government and charity assistance for food, shelter or health care, he said. Businesses who don't pay their employees a living wage are saying the rest of society must subsidize their enterprise, Father Wolf said. "No employer wants to be a part of poverty continuing to exist," he said.

Not everyone is convinced by his arguments, Father Wolf acknowledged. When he preaches on the need for a living wage, he said, "this issue more than any other elicits more strident reactions" in opposi-

tion. "It takes people a while to wrestle with it," Father Wolf said.

Some argue that wages should only be set by the market, Father Wolf said. "But we don't believe that. If we did, we wouldn't have a minimum wage in the first place."

Others argue that the key is education – the working poor can improve their pay by getting more education. But, Father Wolf said, many of the working poor don't have the time or energy to pursue further education.

He finds support for a living wage in the "Catechism of the Catholic Church," which calls injustice to wage earners a sin that cries to heaven. "The reason for that," Father Wolf said, "is workers have children."

The Catechism says, "A just wage is the legitimate fruit of work. To refuse or withhold it can be a grave injustice." It also says the amount a worker is paid should guarantee them, "the opportunity to provide a dignified livelihood for himself and his family on the material, social, cultural and spiritual level."

Father Wolf understands the competitive strains many small businesses operate under, but over a generation's time, he said, society could accept the standard of a living wage.

Congregations Offering a Living Wage hopes to build a coalition in support of the issue, Father Wolf said.

"We've got a new Council, we've got a new mayor, so we may have a new opportunity," the Rev. Barnes said. ☩