

**ABUNDANT LIFE
FOR ALL**
A LIVING WAGE SERIES

ISSUE 6 Aug 2020

Essential Workers, Structural Racism and COVID-19: Undervalued Workers, Underpaid Work

By Emily Jones and elmira Nazombe

“Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.”

Ephesians 6:11-12, King James Version

“Rulers of the darkness of this world...”

The racial disparities of the COVID-19 crisis, the recent police lynchings of Black people and the backlash to the Black Lives Matter movement have revealed more clearly than ever the principalities and powers at work in our world. These principalities and powers are manifest in generations of intersecting realities of structural racism+sexism+xenophobia, overt and covert, which combine to keep women of color’s wages low and workplace protections inadequate, even while they are deemed during the crisis “essential workers”:

A Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) in Connecticut

Francene Bailey is a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) at a nursing home in Connecticut. In late March 2020 she went home from work sick with a cough and fever. The cough became pneumonia. Ms. Bailey tested positive for COVID-19. Eventually, Ms. Bailey recovered. But her 73-year-old mother, with whom she shared a house, did not. In mid-April, Ms. Bailey’s mother, Hazel Bailey, died of complications from COVID-19.¹

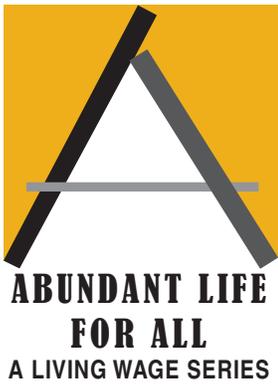
Francene Bailey is not alone. 4 of 5 SEIU 1199NE (New England Health Care Employees Union) nursing home workers are African American and 4 of 5 are women. As of late April 2020, 1 of 7 had contracted COVID-19 or been quarantined for symptoms.²

“

Would this population of caregivers be treated differently if they were white, and male, and wealthy? I think the answer is pretty obvious.”

- Rob Baril, President of SEIU 1199³

1. [https://www.ctpost.com/news/coronavirus/article/Daughter-convinced-she-gave-mother-coronavirus-15241859.php?utm_campaign=CMS%20Sharing%20Tools%20\(Desktop\)&utm_source=share-by-email&utm_medium=email](https://www.ctpost.com/news/coronavirus/article/Daughter-convinced-she-gave-mother-coronavirus-15241859.php?utm_campaign=CMS%20Sharing%20Tools%20(Desktop)&utm_source=share-by-email&utm_medium=email). Accessed July 18, 2020
2. <https://ctmirror.org/2020/04/24/would-this-population-of-caregivers-be-treated-differently-if-they-were-white-and-male-and-wealthy/>. Accessed July 18, 2020
3. Ibid.
4. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/15/us/coronavirus-south-dakota-meat-plant-refugees.html>. Accessed July 20, 2020



It is not race, but, rather, structural racism – America’s collective sin – that has made people of color more vulnerable to COVID-19 and its ongoing repercussions...”



A Pork Processing Shift Leader in South Dakota

Achut Deng, a refugee from war in the Sudan and the mother of three sons, works for Smithfield Foods, processing pork in Sioux Falls, S.D.⁴ Ms. Deng had COVID-19, accompanied by a fever of 103 and difficulty breathing. Yet, she said, “I can’t wait to go back to work for the simple reason that this is the only thing that supports my family.”⁵

The Smithfield plant became the largest single source of COVID-19 infections in the county and was forced to shut down in late April. With employees working side-by-side under difficult conditions, the virus spread rapidly at meatpacking and poultry plants, with 4,900+ diagnosed COVID-19 cases across 19+ states as of late April 2020.⁶

The Bigger Picture

Current research tells a story of the disparate racial impact of COVID-19 across the United States. These statistics are from April and May 2020:

- Nationwide: Hospitalization rates for Native American, Alaska Native and Black people are 5 times that of non-Hispanic white people; for Latinx they are 4 times that of non-Hispanic whites.⁷
- Iowa: Latinx were 6.2% of the population but 23.5% of coronavirus cases.⁸
- Illinois: African Americans are 15% of population but 28% of persons testing positive for the coronavirus and 43% of coronavirus deaths.⁹
- The average verified COVID-19 cases on American Indian reservations is 32 for 100,000; the Navajo Nation average is 1100 per 100,000.¹⁰

“Spiritual wickedness” and Structural Racism

Sin-sick systems discriminate and the results are often deadly. It is not race, but, rather, structural racism – America’s collective sin – that has made people of color more vulnerable to COVID-19 and its ongoing repercussions, through a variety of means:

- Healthcare inequities, for example¹¹ racial bias in the healthcare system limiting testing and treatment, chronic lack of access to adequate healthcare prior to the novel coronavirus, pre-existing conditions due to poverty and the stress of living in a racist society, under-resourced hospitals and healthcare systems, and hospital closures.
- Environmental factors, such as increased exposure to long-term toxins, air pollution and asthma triggers in people of color-majority residential areas, lack of access to clean water.¹²
- Discriminatory and predatory policing that contributes to the mass incarceration of people of color in federal and state prisons, local jails, immigration detention centers and juvenile justice facilities.
- Economic pressures, including increased exposure risk from continued work in frontline essential jobs, often without paid sick leave or adequate healthcare coverage, and less access to the safety net of intergenerational wealth.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/covid-data/covidview/>. Accessed July 28, 2020

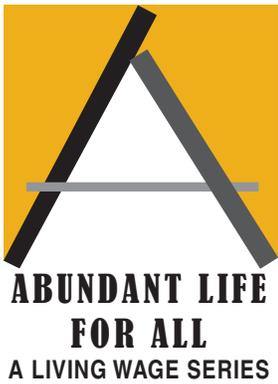
8. <https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/news/2020/06/04/african-american-leaders-look-channel-iowa-protesters-passion-into-lasting-change/3136522001/>. Accessed July 28, 2020

9. <https://nytimes.com/2020/04/07/us/coronavirus-race.html>. Accessed July 20, 2020

10. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/how-covid-19-is-impacting-indigenous-peoples-in-the-u-s> Accessed July 20, 2020

11. See UMW “Abundant Life for All” series addressing some of these workers. <https://www.unitedmethodistwomen.org/abundant-life-for-all>. Accessed July 18, 2020

12. Ibid.



I feel like we have power to change things,” said Rosalinda Gonzalez, a 19-year warehouse veteran who served on the negotiating team presenting demands to owners.



“Put on the whole armor of God”—What Must Be Done

Join the Struggle.

Women of color in the agriculture sector have been organizing. Women workers, trained by *Familias Unidas por la Justicia*, a farm worker organization in Yakima Valley, Washington, went on strike in May and June demanding coronavirus protections in fruit warehouses. Women workers won settlements in all six sites: agreements for safety, hazard pay and other concerns.¹³

As the COVID-19 crisis continues:

- Advocate for all workers to have adequate employer-provided personal protective equipment (PPE) to do their jobs safely.
- Support extended unemployment benefits and other economic relief. Advocate so that these benefits are available to *all* workers, including those who are undocumented. Challenge the push for workers to return to work in unsafe conditions.
- Tell your state and federal legislators that all workers need paid family and medical leave both now and into the future.

In the long term:

- Support workers organizing for power on the job. Support formal and informal labor unions, especially unions and workers’ centers composed primarily of women of color. Fight for a living wage for all.
- Support policies that foster a just distribution of wealth including reparations for communities disadvantaged by systemic racism.

And always:

- Economic justice is not possible without deep, cross-racial solidarity and coalition building. Resist political narratives that pit “working-class people” against “people of color.” Many people carry both identities.
- Join the Poor People’s Campaign¹⁵: A National Call for a Moral Revival, which is building a movement led by poor people to challenge systemic racism and economic inequality.

About the Authors:

Since 2018 Emily Jones has been the executive for racial justice with United Methodist Women National Office. Elmira Nazombe, editor of the *Abundant Life for All* series, served as the executive for racial justice, United Methodist Women National Office, from 2004-2011.

13. https://www.yakimaherald.com/special_projects/coronavirus/agreement-at-columbia-reach-pack-ends-final-ag-worker-strike-in-the-yakima-valley/article_98e08d76-1d48-5a83-a6da-7119267667ab.html?fbclid=IwAR3KUEEwUp2g8H-V49EYpwsCP0u1Ea1YBfsv-5v3Cq06LgCi_CDdX_QpH70#utm_source=yakimaherald.com&utm_campaign=%2Fnewsletters%2Fmorningreport%2F%3Fdc%3D1591961419&utm_medium=email&utm_content=image. Accessed July 20, 2020

14. Ibid.

15. <https://youtu.be/opKENFMBYKc>. Accessed July 20, 2020

Abundant Life for All is a series addressing aspects of the United Methodist Women Living Wage for All Campaign for use by members in programs for education and action. Edited by Elmira Nazombe.



unitedmethodistwomen.org/living-wages