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Commentary

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The other

Invisible citizens

While America may have embraced the idea that we welcome “your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,” history has taught that no segment of the population has been given “inalienable” rights unless they were willing to fight for them. Likewise, the struggle for commensurate pay has long been a bone of contention between those in power and those who just want to be treated fairly.

In recent memory, African American workers had to fight for pay equal to their Caucasian counterparts. Women, too, were forced to prove their worth as equal citizens under the law even though recent studies still put female earning potential significantly lower than a man of the same merit.

To overtly discriminate against African Americans or women in the year 2012 should tax the moral sensibility of this nation, and would likely prompt swift civil repercussions to said offender. Which brings up legality. Under the Fair Labor Standards Act’s Section 14(c), the government says it’s OK to pay an entire group of Americans a wage less than what is deemed minimal – and just because they belong to a particular group. To paraphrase an ex-employer who once utilized Section 14(c) to pay workers with disabilities less than the minimum wage, “Just because something is legal, doesn’t make it right.”

Goodwill Industries has portrayed its business as giving persons with disabilities gainful employment, but is it really employment if workers are being given a token wage, sometimes not even enough to buy a pack of gum after a week?

Advocates of fair treatment for persons with disabilities say if a person cannot perform the work, don’t give them a job; but they insist if that person is doing the work, they should be paid the minimum wage. Those same advocates understand the concern is rarely about ability but rather the bottom line. Employers who say they will go out of business if they cannot pay workers pennies an hour deserve to go out of business.

Activist Anil Lewis – who is himself a blind man and considered a person with disabilities under Section 14(c) – says, “Our experience shows us that the practice of paying sub-minimum wages is unfair, discriminatory and immoral.” Furthermore, he contends, the practice of paying persons with disabilities a wage less than any other American is fundamentally unjust.

In the words of another activist who sought to bring about an equal playing field for his fellow man, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” It is past time for a measured public debate that weighs the importance of creating opportunities for workers with disabilities against the need to prevent exploitation through unconscionable rates of pay.