

# ECUMENICAL MINISTRIES *of* OREGON

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Testimony on SB 573

Senate Committee on General Government, Consumer and Small Business Protection

My name is Rev. Eugene Ross, and I am representing Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon (EMO) today. We urge you to support SB 573, which provides workers with stronger tools for recovery of earned wages that are not paid by employers—in essence, wages that are stolen.

As a statewide association of religious denominations, congregations and community-based cooperative ministries, EMO represents hundreds of Oregonians in every rural and urban community throughout the state. Our testimony today emanates from our shared religious values, which affirm the value and dignity of every human being and a concern for every person's well being. This is why we ask you to support human dignity and security by supporting SB 573.

Despite the existence of basic wage and hour laws in our state, wage theft is widespread in Oregon—from minimum wage and overtime violations to complete non-payment of wages. Low-wage workers who don't get paid are left without money to provide food and shelter for their families. Such actions not only violate the law, they also transgress basic moral principles. Jewish and Christian scriptures are unequivocal: "Thou shalt not steal." From Deuteronomy 24:15 we read: "You must pay out the wages due on the same day, before the sun sets. For the worker is needy and urgently depends on it."

Stronger protections would have helped 16 workers in Woodburn, who received almost no pay for two months of grueling painting and cleaning work. The labor broker who hired them disappeared, robbing them of nearly \$80,000 in uncompensated wages. Theirs is not an isolated case. During a recent six-year period, Oregon workers filed nearly 9,900 wage claims for \$28.2 million in unpaid wages with the Oregon Bureau of Labor and Industries, according to the Oregon Center for Public Policy.

SB 573 will address flaws in the current system by helping workers who have not been paid to assert claims against an employer's assets early in the process, before the income generated by their labor disappears. It will also level the playing field for honest employers who currently have to compete with wage thieves. Ultimately, wage theft harms all workers, honest employers, our communities, and our state revenues.

When wage theft occurs, work becomes a form of exploitation. In the face of such exploitation and injustice, Oregon's faith communities will not stay silent, and neither should our elected officials. EMO joined over 100 other leaders and members of Oregon faith communities in signing an interfaith letter urging Oregon lawmakers to address wage theft this session. I have submitted a copy of the letter with my written testimony today.

I urge you to support SB 573. This bill will help ensure the ethical treatment of our workers and will contribute to a more just and prosperous future for all Oregonians.

Respectfully,

The Rev. Eugene Ross