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# Brothers and Breadwinners: Legislating Living Wages in the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938

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deserving of particular living standards. Debates over the language in the FLSA reveal

the contested nature of masculinity during the period of economic crisis in the 1930s. Advocates responded by defining a multiplicity of living wages corresponding with different living standards, as well as a multiplicity of strategies for achieving them.

Keywords: [minimum wage](#) [living wage](#) [New Deal](#) [gender](#) [masculinity](#) [economic policy](#)

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## Notes

The term “masculinity” is used to express the historically constructed process of defining and measuring manhood. For a discussion of the historical process of defining manhood, see Theda Skocpol (1985) and Theda Skocpol (1985). For information on the history of commerce, see Mettler (2003). The women's party had long opposed gender neutrality in their criteria for a “wage” and the National Labor Relations Act, gender-

neutral minimum wage. The U.S. Women's Bureau, an agency of the Department of Labor that also advocated protective legislation, also worked behind the scenes to ensure passage.

Responding to their assertions, the representative from the Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees documented the low wages of employees in the north as well as the south and contested the designation of track men and section men as unskilled labourers (U.S. Congress [1937](#): 1149-1161).

See Power ([1999](#)) and Prash and Seth ([1999](#)) for discussion of the relationship between productivity, efficiency, and wage levels in the writings of early twentieth-century minimum wage advocates.

Ryan published *A Living Wage: Its Ethical and Economic Aspects* in 1906. In his second book on the topic, *Distributive Justice*, he asserted that "... the ethical value of labor is always equivalent to at least a living wage, and the employer is morally bound to give this much remuneration" (Ryan [1996](#) [1916]: 119).

Very few African Americans worked in the southern textile and other manufacturing plants until after World War II.

As discussed above, this was a partially unionized industry in which the union

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