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Angels' stadium keepers kept out of heaven

by Joe Ferullo

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Everywhere you turn, there's some pungent example of an economic system out of whack, where the spread between rich and poor gets wider despite markets crashes, meltdowns, debt crises and devaluations. But my favorite case study involves a bunch of angels.

Well, OK, not those angels, but the Angels -- the American League baseball team in Los Angeles.

At the team's stadium in suburban Orange County, the low-paid part-time workers who usher fans to their seats, sell tickets, and clean bathrooms have authorized their union to strike. According to Los Angeles Time business columnist Michael Hiltzik, this comes after a stalemate in talks that began back in February.

Let's wallow in statistics for a second. (Baseball fans love statistics.) The Angels team is one of the richest and most successful franchises in all of professional sports, valued by Forbes magazine at \$554 million, up 6 percent from last year. The team is now worth three times what owner Arte Moreno paid for it when he bought it from the Walt Disney Company in 2003 -- yep, even with the Great Recession. The Angels carry the fourth largest player payroll in the major leagues.

Here is what that last stat means: the stadium workers' union says the total payroll for its members, including Social Security taxes, is about \$6 million. According to Hiltzik, that's just a bit more than the annual pay for the average player on the team's roster. One player.

Now, these are not jobs on which to raise a family -- everyone knows that. But the Angels pay even less than other California professional teams and workers need the extra money more than ever: what used to be fun side jobs for baseball fans are now necessary second jobs for people with families and retirees looking to keep their head above water during a financial downturn.

As metaphors go, I love this one: everyone else in this story is up there in the heavens among the haves: the team owner, team executives, folks settled comfortably into corporate-owned box seats behind home plate, and all those players on the field right in front of them. But the people on the ground who keep the place running, who keep it clean and welcoming: it seems they're just not among the angels.

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