



The Rank and File Catholic

(Connecting the teaching of the Church with the struggles of Labor)

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Publisher: David M. Grief IBEW LU 816 (Retired) St. Francis deSales Parish, Paducah, KY NEW dmgrief@comcast.net	Chaplain: Fr. Anthony Shonis Holy Name of Jesus Parish, Henderson, KY ashonis@holynameparish.net	Staff: Todd Butler, Director of Ministry, Brescia University, Owensboro, KY St. Joseph & Paul Parish, Owensboro, KY todd.butler@brescia.edu	Editor: Todd Johnson, Sprinkler Fitters LU 669 St. Stephen Cathedral, Owensboro, KY Org669@aol.com	Staff: Darrell Howard Retired Sts. Joseph and Paul Owensboro, KY howard0655@att.net
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The Challenge and the Struggle!

By: Ken Menges

Missouri State Legislative Director
United Transportation Union Local 933
Immaculate Conception Parish
Jefferson City, MO
moutu@embarqmail.com

We live in a society that promotes that we take care of ourselves first and foremost. In the United States we are inundated with the constant desire to be our own individual - to be American. We each have rights that are sacred and these rights lay the foundation for our great democracy. In this desire to be the non-conformist - to be as individual as we can, we are confronted with the difficult struggle of dealing with any ideals that promote the good of all versus the good of me.

In a society of individualism it is a constant fight to live and breathe a faith that teaches us to take care of each other and to share. We live and work in a world that drives us to acquire wealth and self sufficiency while thinking about Jesus' response to the question, "Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." Where does the American dream fit in?

What a challenge! How do we face that challenge and yet care for our families? This has been a constant struggle for me. I was born in Jefferson City, MO and was raised by two Kansas Catholic Democrats (somewhat of an oxymoron) and left home at 13 to attend the seminary (that is where I met Fr. Tony Shonis; a long story on how our paths have now crossed). I left the seminary (got married) and got a job as a brakeman on the Missouri Pacific Railroad---quite a change from the seminary to the "rough and tough" railroad life.

The Challenge and the Struggle! I had been taught by my parents and trained through my schooling that we needed to take care of each other but here I was in a world of greed both corporate and personal. I found an answer - my union; but the struggle with the challenge continues - us vs. them! Organized labor allows us to be "ministers" to our members and "ministers" of our faith.

It is in meeting this challenge that we bring together our faith and union; as the greatest of organizers said, "Love your neighbor as yourself."

Pope Benedict XVI said in his Encyclical letter "God is Love" (*Deus Caritas Est*): "everything has its origin in God's love, everything is shaped by it, everything is directed toward it. Love is God's greatest gift to humanity, it is His promise and our hope."

Respecting Workers As Part of Health Care

By: Fr. John S. Rausch, Glenmary Missioner
Director Catholic Committee of Appalachia
Stanton, KY

jsrausch@bellsouth.net

Long union organizing campaigns frequently morph into passionate fights that leave anger and resentment with both management and workers. In December 2007, a Catholic hospital, Community Health Partners Regional Medical Center in Lorain, Ohio and the Service Employees International Union pulled off a uniquely fair election for union representation. The formula: the hospital and union agreed beforehand to a respectful, non-confrontational and expedited process. Hospital management agreed not to conduct secret meetings with employees threatening recriminations against pro-union employees, and the union pledged not to vilify the hospital. Conclusion: three of the five proposed bargaining units rejected the union, but two voted to join. For the brief two-week campaign process, no grievances or unfair labor practices were filed.

This labor-management experiment demonstrated a sterling example that informed the guidelines promoted by the U.S. Catholic bishops for creating a fair process to guarantee workers their right to organize in accordance with Catholic teachings. Released in June, 2009 the document, entitled "Respecting the Just Rights of Workers: Guidance and Options for Catholic Health Care and Unions," attempts to find common ground and a respectful alternative acceptable to hospitals and unions.

"It is up to workers—not bishops, hospital managers, or union leaders—to decide how they will be represented in the workplace," said Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, who chaired a dialogue to draft the guidelines among the USCCB, the Catholic Health Association of the U.S., the AFL-CIO, and SEIU. "Because Catholic Health Care is a ministry, not an industry, how it treats its workers and how organized labor treats Catholic Health Care...should reflect Catholic teaching on work and workers, health care and the common good."

Basically, the Guidance and Options document discourages negative campaigning by either side preserving respect for each side's organization and mission. It assures equal access to information from both sides and sets standards for truthfulness and balance in communications. It creates a pressure-free environment and allows workers to vote fairly and in a timely manner. It hinges on civil dialogue. Then, to ensure these principles, "local agreements" outline the rules at the beginning of the process and guarantee a pledge to honor the employees' decision regardless of the outcome. Should the process get stuck, the guidelines call for a neutral party to resolve the disagreements. (CONTINUED ON PAGE 2).

