



The Rank and File Catholic

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

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“Right-To-Work.....For Less”

**By Eldon J. Renaud
President, UAW Local 2164
St. Joseph’s Parish, Bowling Green, KY**

Congress passed the National Labor Relations Act in 1935. The NLRA guaranteed workers the right to join unions without fear of management reprisal. By 1945, 35% of Americans workers had joined unions. In an effort to curb union organizing, industrialists and labor’s enemies succeeded in convincing Congress to pass the Taft-Hartley Act in 1947. Taft-Hartley sanctioned states to prohibit unions from requiring a worker to pay dues, even when the worker was covered by a union-negotiated collective bargaining agreement. To date, 23 states have passed these so-called right-to-work laws.

The term “right-to-work” is at best a deceptive term. Everyone in America has a right-to-work. Anti-union forces deliberately mislabeled the term in an effort to make the issue sound more appealing. Right-to-work laws typically just outlaw union shops.

Those states that have passed these laws have not done so to protect workers or to give anyone a right to work. Rather, they passed the law to reduce union density and effectiveness. Under Taft-Hartley, unions are forced to bargain and represent non-dues paying members in the same way they represent dues-paying members. The effect on unions is obvious: with less dues money, unions spend less on organizing, bargaining, and grievance handling. So, who benefits from right-to-work laws...Employers, not employees. We know that some greedy citizens would not even pay their taxes if there was a law guaranteeing the same protections given to tax-paying citizens. But, as you know, if you don’t pay your taxes, you will go to jail until you agree to pay them.

Christ told us to give to Caesar what is Caesars and to the Lord what is the Lords. The Catholic Conference of Kentucky as well as the U.S. Catholic Conference of Bishops have always upheld the rights of union membership and opposed so-called “right-to-work” laws for this very reason. The Catholic Church could not maintain churches, educate our brethren, or offer social services if members refused to make church offerings.

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“Prevailing Wage”

**By Joseph B. Wise, III Business Manager,
Greater Louisville Building & Construction
Trades Council, Iron Workers LU 70
St. Patrick Parish, Louisville, KY**

There is much confusion over the term prevailing wage among the general population. The term prevailing wage is a law that requires contractors on federally funded or state funded projects to pay a “fair wage” or the current community wage. This community wage helps to ensure that workers from the community are utilized on projects and prevents the importation of lower waged temporary workers into a community. The idea of a fair community wage is the subject of one of the parables that Jesus taught. In Matthew chapter 20 verse 2 we find that an owner of an estate is looking to hire workmen for his vineyard and “after reaching an agreement for the usual daily wage, he sends them out to his vineyard”. This is what we should be espousing as Catholics that workers need to receive a fair wage for a fair day of work.

The argument that many opponents of prevailing like to make is that prevailing wage drives up the cost of construction and that prevailing wage is the “union wage”. These statements are both false! There have been studies conducted that prove that prevailing wage does not increase the cost of construction projects. Data from 391 new schools built in Kentucky, Ohio and Michigan between the years of 1992 and 2000 indicated that there were no significant difference between those schools built under prevailing wage and those not.

The prevailing wage is determined by surveying projects in a given area, for most of Kentucky the area is the state senatorial district. Contractors bring evidence to what has been paid to workers in various construction classifications over a given period of time. The evidence that has the per ponderous in a classification becomes the prevailing wage for that area. It is not a union wage nor is it a non-union wage.

What are some of the benefits of prevailing wage? Prevailing wage laws induces contractors to compete on the basis of training, equipment and management skills.

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The effect of right-to-work laws has been to depress wages. People working in union shops that refuse to pay union dues, force dues paying members to carry them (on their backs), thus the term “free-riders.” Any organization, union, chamber of commerce, or church membership would be destined for failure that was forced to carry free-riders.

In 1978, Missourians voted to defeat the right-to-work law by a wide margin thanks to the support of the Catholic Bishops. Catholic Churches invited the public to church basements, school annexes, and cafeterias to learn the truth about right-to-work laws. The Archbishop of St. Louis, Catholic Bishops, Monsignors and Priests partnered with organized labor to denounce right-to-work laws. Coalitions were formed with various religious leaders, the Jewish community, teachers, environmentalists, and community action groups to inform the public and work to defeat the right-to-work law.

The industrial revolution was fueled by the social contract between employers and employees. Wages, health care, living conditions, working conditions and educational attainment blossomed when unions were vibrant. Today, in times of corporate greed, scandal, right-to-work laws, wage depression, and outsourcing to slave-wage countries, Americans are seeing their standards of living fall. For the first time in American history, parents are seeing their adult children earning less than they did. Workers in right-to-work states have a diminished standard of living: higher poverty, lower wages, less health care, poorer education, higher infant mortality, and a greater likelihood of being hurt or killed in the workplace. A job is supposed to be a way out of poverty, not a way to keep you in it.

States with right-to-work laws are more politically repressive and have lower per capita incomes than states without these laws. For this reason, the Taft-Hartley Law should be called the “right-to-work for less” law. Labor needs the support of Kentucky Catholics to stop the proliferation of the right-to-work for less law. **Please join us in Frankfort, Kentucky on Tuesday, March 7th from 10:00AM until 2:30PM as we “Stand Up For Working Families”** at the Frankfort Civic Center at 405 Mero Street. Everyone is invited to hear special guest speaker Peter Phillips, PhD at 10:00AM. Lunch will be served from 11:30-12:00PM followed by a march to the Capitol steps and keynote speakers.

CENTESIMUS ANNUS, John Paul II

“There is still need for a broad associated workers’ movement directed toward the liberation and promotion of the whole person.”

“Prevailing Wage”

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The benefits accrue to the community in the short run by having a worker that is more productive, qualified, safer and reliable, which provides the foundation for apprenticeship training, better wages and benefits. In the long run it would benefit the community by knowing that workers that committed their working careers to the construction industry would be able to retire with a pension plan and dignity. This creates a construction environment which leads to higher quality construction.

It has been estimated that should Kentucky lose prevailing wage protection that approximately 800 contractors would drop their workers health insurance. This would equate to around 7,400 construction workers and their families losing health care coverage and pensions. These costs would then be covered by the taxpayer and those having insurance through higher premiums. As Catholics we have always been on the side of the worker. Tell your legislators that you support workers rights by supporting prevailing wage.

Meet Fr. Tim Sweeney, OSB Immaculate Parish, Owensboro, KY

I suspect that I was among the very few 5th graders in the mid 1940’s who knew the story of John L. Lewis and what he did for the coal miners. My father explained to me the meaning of that song “I sold my soul to the company store”, and how John L. Lewis broke the almost indentured servant role of the coal miners to the company. Until Lewis the miners just couldn’t break free from their indebtedness to the company.

My father worked for Kingan & Co., a now defunct meat-packing firm in Indianapolis. Many of the Irish who settled in Indianapolis at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century worked there. My father was a union man and a shop steward. He had a broad knowledge of the working conditions of laborers in the United States and delighted in passing on this knowledge to his son. Clearly he personally saw the need for unions and had personally experience with what a good union could do for the workers.

As I pursued my studies for the Catholic priesthood this interest in labor unions remained with me. I noted how some American bishops went to Rome to defend the Knights of Labor against any condemnation from the Vatican. Then I became interested in the various encyclicals [official teaching documents] of the Catholic Church regarding unions. I noted that already in 1891 Pope Leo XIII spoke in favor of unions, and again in 1931 Pope Pius XI repeated this support. Of course in our day Pope John Paul II was a strong supporter of the Solidarity movement in Poland.

I have always been grateful to my father for his personal service as a shop steward and for giving me an abiding interest in the labor movement.

CATHOLIC CLERGY OF THE DIOCESE OF OWENSBORO STATEMENT ON THE RIGHT OF WORKERS TO ORGANIZE AND FORM UNIONS*

I, a member of the Catholic clergy of the Diocese of Owensboro, Kentucky, believe that all persons are created in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:27). This means that all persons have worth and deserve to be treated with dignity and respect. I believe that God cares about working people (Ex. 2:23-25, Dt. 24:14) and wants them to be treated with fairness and justice (Is. 10:1, 2; Mal. 3:5; Matt. 7:12; 1Cor. 9:9,10; 2Tim. 2:6; James 5:4). God teaches, through Sacred Scriptures, that we are to treat others as we wish to be treated, that laborers deserve just compensation, and that sufficient rest is vital to all.

Moreover, the consistent teaching of the popes, beginning with Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum* and including the encyclical *Laborem Exercens* of Pope John Paul II, has affirmed the right of workers to be treated fairly and the right to organize themselves into labor unions and bargain collectively.

In this spirit,

I, as a Catholic leader, support the right of workers and all ethnic groups to form unions for the purpose of collective bargaining to attain fairness, safety and dignity in the workplace, and a just wage. Insofar as this can be accomplished, I support all workers, organized and unorganized.

And, I call upon all employers to remain open to their employees' right to form a union, if they desire.

"Among the basic rights of the human person must be counted the right of freely founding labor unions." **Gaudium et Spes, n. 68** *The Documents of Vatican II, Walter M. Abbot, S.J.*

Signed

Date

*Bishop John McRaith and the Priests' Council of the Diocese of Owensboro found this statement to be consistent with Roman Catholic Church teachings concerning workers' rights.

"Practicing What We Preach" Catholic Church's Role on Unions. By Mike Roby, IBEW LU 1701, Blessed Mother Parish, Owensboro, KY

In our last issue we gave a brief history of the Church's support of the rights of workers to organize. Now, let's take a look at the Church's role.

The Church's teaching on labor should not be just an appeal to others, but a goal of the Church itself.

"While the Church is bound to give witness to justice, she recognizes that anyone who ventures to speak to people must first be "just" in their eyes. Hence, we must undertake an examination of the modes of acting and the possessions and life style found within the Church itself."

(Justice in the World)

In several areas, construction included, the Church is an "indirect employer" of workers. Pope John Paul II points out in *"Laborem Exercens"* that an indirect employer establishes the conditions

under which the direct employer determines the actual work contract. The term itself indicates that the responsibility is less direct, but still a true responsibility. The Church as an indirect employer is still required to safeguard and respect the rights of workers, primarily the worker's right to organize, earn "just" wages, decent benefits and working conditions.

The Canonical Standards in Labor-Management Relations states: 1) "The Church's teaching on law with regard to employer-employee relations applies to direct and indirect employers, including subcontractors." 2) "The local ordinary, and in particular the diocesan bishop, has a vigilant role over all Church related activity in the diocese, including the observance of Church law on employer-employee relations." 3) "The dignity of the human person within the common good is the yard stick by which all considerations regarding the relationships between employers and employees are to be judged."

These three principles point to the Church's obligation to insure just pay, good working conditions and fair "benefits" on diocesan projects.

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“The Rank and File Catholic” (TRAFc) newsletter debuted on Television on September 30th, 2005. This ½ hour program was recorded at the “West Kentucky Community and Technical College” located in Paducah, KY as part of a series titled “THE UNION LABEL” and was hosted by Berry Craig. Fr. Anthony Shonis, Chaplain of TRAFc, and Mike Roby, Editor of TRAFc, were his guest. A DVD of the program may be obtained from the TRAFc staff.

PUBLISHER’S NOTE: The major expense we have in the publication of this newsletter is the cost of distribution! It would be helpful if we could e-mail it to as many as possible. If e-mail would work for you, please send your e-mail address to: dmgrief@peoplepc.com. THANKS

Additional information may be found on the internet at:
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops; www.usccb.org/sdwp/national/labor.htm
CATHOLIC CONFERENCE OF KENTUCKY: www.ccky.org

The Chaplain’s Corner

**Fr. Anthony Shonis,
St. Francis deSales and Rosary Chapel Parishes,
Paducah, KY**

The reason we have chosen March 14 as the date for this issue of the Rank and File Catholic is that it was on March 14, 1891 that Pope Leo XIII issued the Magna Carta encyclical on labor RERUM NOVARUM (On the Condition of Labor).

The Catholic Church has not only supported the right of working men and women in its official teaching but does so at every Sunday Mass.

Look around you at Mass! Here are people of different economic backgrounds, social levels, educational backgrounds as well as different races and nationalities. The message is that we are all one human family and that reminds us that it is not enough that my life is improving, but rather what about the larger community the ‘common good’? I may have health insurance but what about my neighbor? I may have a good paying job, but what about my neighbor? I may work in a safe and pollution free environment, but what about my neighbor?

The unspoken message every Sunday Mass when we gather together is that we are all in this together...the solidarity of the human family.

Unions & Catholics!

**Burford Wilson,
International Association of Machinist (IAM),
LU 1294 (Retired), Rosary Chapel Parish,
Paducah, KY**

I am a twenty year veteran of the United States Air Force and a life member with the IAM.

History tells us that unions have been best for our families and country.

People migrated from the South where organized labor was uncommon and went North for a better way of life.

Union Shops have always had better wage scales for their employees, so therefore you could better support yourself and family.

People are better stewards in life if they are secure, knowing there’s some protection within the workplace. Without organized labor you don’t have the opportunity to negotiate what your benefits, wages, work rules or safety will be and the employer dictates what will transpire. True enough, there have been some problems with organized labor, but what organization doesn’t have problems? Labor unions are the check and balance in our work system.

We as Catholics need to think what’s best for our community and fellow man.