



The Rank and File Catholic

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

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Hidden Treasure in The Catholic Tradition By Patti Keteltas

“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

This summer, through an internship with *Interfaith Worker Justice*, I have had the honor of working with the *United Mine Workers of America* in Princeton, Indiana, on their Peabody Campaign. (Please see: www.justiceatpeabody.org) Driving along the back-roads of Indiana and Kentucky amidst the rolling hills and green meadows, I experienced the beauty of the “American Heartland”, and discovered a treasure worth more than gold.

Like many Catholics, I was unaware of our strong Catholic Social Teaching. Beginning as a response to the deplorable condition of workers during the industrial revolution, our popes and bishops have consistently written supporting human dignity, workers’ rights, and the common good.¹ Following in this tradition, Pope Benedict XVI writes in his first Encyclical Letter, *God Is Love*, “Building a just social and civil order, wherein each person receives what is his or her due, is an essential task which every generation must take up anew.”²

One way lay faithful can participate in this task is by having the courage to build labor unions. Unions support family values: giving parents a just wage, health care for spouse and children, safety on the job, reasonable work schedule, time to fulfill parental responsibilities, and pensions to maintain dignity in old age. Coal miners retired from the UMWA testify to the difference the union has made in their lives. It is no coincidence that the loss of power in unions across the U.S. during the past 20 years has diminished the standard of living of America’s workers.

I deeply appreciate the hospitality and listening presence of all who I had the pleasure to visit with this summer. Through my work with the United Mine Workers, I discovered the treasure worth more than gold, the Catholic commitment to the people of God in the Heartland of America.

“Practicing What We Preach.... Part 3” Catholic Bishop’s Statement on Unions.

By Mike Roby

IBEW LU 1701, Blessed Mother Parish

In our previous two issues we have examined the history of the Church’s support of the rights of workers to organize and the Church’s responsibility as an “indirect employer” when it “contracts” work out in independent contractors. In the area of contracting and construction, Church policies should not simply tolerate, but actively support workers in the exercise of their rights.

Policies regarding construction contracts must take into account the reality that workers represented by unions frequently have higher wages, superior benefits, and better working conditions than their non-union counterparts. Specifically, union workers receive hospital and pension coverage despite changing employers or temporary joblessness which characterizes construction work. In addition, non-union workers frequently do not participate in the training of apprentices through joint union-management programs. An open bidding process which ignores this reality will result in a practical preference for companies which do not offer benefits, pay their workers less and do not have training programs, and the Church could find itself denying jobs to workers who have chosen to exercise the right to organize, a right which the Church is committed to defend.

On the other hand a policy of using union labor exclusively demonstrates that the church practices itself, what it preaches, and is serious in supporting workers rights. Some would dispute such policies serve the Church’s needs or are justified by current experience in the labor market. Some of these critics simply do not support the principles or share the values of traditional Catholic social teaching. Others suggest the economic consequences of such policies are too burdensome.

We will examine some alternatives to these problems, but in our next issue I would like to discuss the controversial, to some, issue of “Prevailing Wage”. What is it? How is it determined? What is the purpose? Happy Labor Day to all working men and women!

NOTE:

Workers' Rights Board Hearing, Sun, Sept. 17, 06, 4-6 PM
Zion United Church of Christ,
437 1st Street, Henderson, KY, 42420
Fr. Edward Bradley, Pastor of Holy Name Church
& Fr. Anthony Shonis will attend.
PLEASE COME AND VOICE YOUR OPINION.

¹ See *Compendium of Social Doctrine of the Church*, Pontifical Council *Iustitia et Pax*, 2004.

² Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, USCCB, 2006, n. 28, p. 36

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KENTUCKY WORKING FAMILIES UNITE AT CAPITAL IN FRANKFORT

**By Todd Johnson, Sprinkler Fitter
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What a victory for the workers in Kentucky! On March 7th, 2006 the workers of Kentucky let their voices be heard on the steps of our State Capital in Frankfort. Most legislatures responded by rejecting two bills encouraged by Governor Ernie Fletcher to take money from the pockets of Kentucky's working class and dismantle unions in Kentucky. The bills the Governor introduced in his state budget address speech were to repeal 'prevailing wage' and allow 'right to work'. Before I tell you about my experience March 7th, let me first explain what we were protesting at the Capital that day.

Prevailing wage, as part of state law, is a fair, average, community wage for particular construction trades. Electricians, plumbers, pipe fitters, sprinkler fitters etc. have a designated wage for their particular craft on state public work jobs costing more than \$250,000.00. This encourages contractors to use their most trained, efficient and skilled work force to construct state buildings and at the same time allows the workers to be paid a living wage. It discourages out of state contractors from competing for Kentucky's jobs with a less skilled, less efficient, cheaper work force.

'Right to work' was a bill that in essence was designed solely to burden the union forces in Kentucky. 'Right to work' would demand union representation for a worker who chooses not to pay union dues. As with any organization, a budget and income are essential to achieve their goals. The 'right to work' bill was designed solely to bust unions and weaken the voices of the working class.

As a proud member of the working class of Kentucky, I united with others who were just as outraged at the governor's proposals. The Kentucky State Building and Construction Trades Council presented five town hall meetings across the state to inform the citizens of the governor's true intentions. After they educated the crowds, they organized the labor rally held March 7th. The Governor could not achieve his objectives on his

own without passing through the House and Senate for votes. We united to let our elected officials know that the state can't increase its budget by making the working class pay more than is fair.

We came from every corner of Kentucky, over 5000 of us! Bus loads of working class citizens in Frankfort to make a difference. We met at the Convention Center and heard speeches from union leaders to politicians. We enjoyed a sack lunch and then marched 1 ½ miles from the convention center to the State Capital. We were greeted by various legislatures who supported our efforts. A make shift stage was set up on the steps of the Capital to display speakers, bands and children tap dancing. This wasn't about big corporations or union bosses. This was about the working class, about respect and fairness to workers and their families. What an awesome experience! What was good and fair did not succumb!

The Chaplain's Corner

**By Fr. Anthony Shonis,
Holy Name of Jesus Parish, Henderson, KY**

As we celebrate another Labor Day, I personally am grateful for all workers who make living in the USA a pleasure. Recently I visited France and Switzerland and as always when I visit a new place, I pay attention to the workers. French unions are strong and the work week is 35 hours. When I compare this to the 3rd World, e.g. India, and the number of hours that workers put at their job, I wish all these countries could enjoy the lifestyle of the French. Recently I have come across articles that say that American workers just have to get used to long work hours with little family life if they want to compete in the global market. Who says workers have to get used to these kinds of work conditions? Is this really progress?

The Church has consistently reminded us that 'work is for people, not people for work'. The dignity of the human person is primary and it is not production or capital but people that are most important in any workplace. The June 26th, 2006 issue of "Time" magazine points out how some janitors, through unionization, are now moving into the middle class. Isn't this where unions shine...moving workers out of the cycle of poverty into a decent living where they can provide for their families?

God's blessing on the 'rank and file' throughout the world!