

## Hiring Hall or Collective Action?

In 1776, Adam Smith published *The Wealth of Nations*. He put forth a new principle that the economy should be organized so that an individual is allowed to pursue his or her self interests, and at the same time, the needs of society would be met.

In Book 2, Chapter 2 of *Wealth of Nations*, Smith writes:

“As every individual, therefore, endeavors as much as he can both to employ his capital in the support of domestic industry, and so to direct that industry that its produce may be of the greatest value; every individual necessarily labours to render the annual revenue of the society as great as he can. He generally, indeed, neither intends to promote the public interest, nor knows how much he is promoting it . . . By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it.”

However, before Adam Smith, there was Thomas Aquinas, who in 1265, noted that human beings were not individuals pursuing their own self interest, but social creatures by their nature. When they interact together, not only are their interests met, but the common good is promoted. St. Thomas writes in the *Summa Theologica*:

“Because, to the law of nations belong those things which are derived from the law of nature, as conclusions from premises, e.g. just buyings and sellings, and the like, without which men cannot live together, which is a point of the law of nature, since man is by nature a social animal, as is proved in Polit. i, 2. But those things which are derived from the law of nature by way of particular determination, belong to the civil law, according as each state decides on what is best for itself.

“Secondly, it belongs to the notion of human law, to be ordained to the common good of the state. In this respect human law may be divided according to the different kinds of men who work in a special way for the common good: e.g. priests, by praying to God for the people; princes, by governing the people; soldiers, by fighting for the safety of the people. Wherefore certain special kinds of law are adapted to these men.”

As I write this annual labor day essay, I am sailing as the 12-4 able-bodied watchman on the Great Lakes Motor Vessel *St. Clair*. These sea voyages offer me the opportunity to reenter the world of my avocation, a US merchant mariner.

On every ship, there are constant discussions surrounding three questions:

1. Where are the jobs, and where is shipping best?
2. What company is paying the best?
3. Is there something better for me outside of these union-contracted ships?

This third question raises for me a second question, “What do people understand a union to be?”

Is it a hiring hall where individuals get jobs, so that they can pursue their own needs and goals? Or is a union a point of collective action, where through cooperation, the interests of those members, and the common good of the larger community can be pursued?

When a person sees their union as a hiring hall, a few things follow:

1. The union is a service agency that has the responsibility of finding him or her a job.
2. Any demand that the union places on the member's time or energy is perceived as an encroachment on his or her rights and freedom.
3. Any financial request by the union that goes beyond dues is perceived as a "shakedown."
4. Finally, if one is able to jump to a competing non-union company for a little bit more, then one is free, and in fact, has the right to do so, irrespective of how it affects the union or fellow members.

However, when a union is seen as a means of collective action, different things follow:

1. Collective bargaining replaces individual negotiation.
2. The good of the community is set in relationship to the good of the individual.
3. The best and the brightest may sacrifice a bit for what they can gain on the own, but the average person is helped along to more than what he or she could acquire by themselves.
4. Finally, the collective action of working men and women can be a countervailing force to those of self interest, and the maximization of personal gain.

Christians believe that we will be judged at the end times individually, but what that judgement will be based on is how we lived in relationship with our brothers and sisters. A few passages from scripture make this point.

In Matthew 25, Jesus says that we will be judge by how we care for others:

"Then the king will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me.'" (Mt. 25:34-36)

"He will answer them, 'Amen, I say to you, what you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me.' And these will go off to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life." (Mt. 25:45-46)

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples that what they acquire on earth will do nothing to give them eternal life:

"Then he told them a parable. "There was a rich man whose land produced a bountiful harvest. He asked himself, 'What shall I do, for I do not have space to store my harvest?' And he said, 'This is what I shall do: I shall tear down my barns

and build larger ones. There I shall store all my grain and other goods, and I shall say to myself, "Now as for you, you have so many good things stored up for many years, rest, eat, drink, be merry!" But God said to him, 'You fool, this night your life will be demanded of you; and the things you have prepared, to whom will they belong?' Thus will it be for the one who stores up treasure for himself but is not rich in what matters to God." (Lk. 12:16-21)

Since 1891, the Catholic Church has always supported the natural right of workers to form and join unions. It has done this not so the individual could use the effort of the group to promote his or her personal advancement. Rather, the Catholic Church saw in unions the means by which:

1. Workers could have a voice and some moral ownership of their work.
2. Collective effort could bring about improvements in the common good.
3. That same collective efforts today, will lay the foundation upon which the next generation could build.

On this Labor Day, union members need to ask themselves, "Am I a member in order to get a job, or am I part of something bigger than just me and just now?"