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Catholic hospitals and their workers

Michael Sean Winters | Jun. 22, 2009 NCR Today

It's not every day that you can get John Sweeney, the president of the AFL-CIO, and Dennis Rivera, chair of SEIU Healthcare, together. The two organizations have been at loggerheads on a series of issues. But, if anyone can get them together, it is Cardinal Theodore McCarrick who joined the two on a conference call hosted by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops to announce the release of a document titled "Respecting the Just Rights of Workers: Guidance and Options for Catholic Health Care and Unions."

The document is the fruit of two years of discussions between the bishops, Catholic health care officials and union leaders. Sr. Carol Keehan, DC, president of the Catholic Health Association was a key player in the negotiations and, like McCarrick, you would need to be pretty more than a little intransigent not to fall prey to her considerable powers of reasonableness and persuasion. Essentially, the document provides guidelines for respecting the rights of workers at Catholic hospitals to form unions. It calls for mutual respect, equal access to information on the part of both labor and management, truthful communication and the avoidance of harassment or coercion by either the unions or the employers. It also insists that all sides honor the results of a union election.

The church has, since Pope Leo XIII's 1891 encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, upheld the rights of workers to unionize, although in practice some bishops have tended to carve out a large exception for themselves and their employees. I have in my memory a vivid picture of Cardinal Spellman overseeing a group of seminarians digging graves when the gravediggers of New York went on strike. I also have a vivid memory of another archbishop of New York, Cardinal O'Connor, refusing a media outlet access to a press conference because the crew was, as he termed them, "scabs."

The current document should be seen as a furthering of O'Connor?s approach. It recognizes that "health care is a human right ... both a service and a ministry." It states unequivocally that the bishops affirm "two key values: 1) the central role of workers themselves in making choices about representation and 2) the principle of mutual agreement between employers and unions on the means and methods to assure that workers could make their choices freely and fairly." If you know anything about the outrageous union-busting tactics that are part of everyday use in contemporary America, these principles are not mere feel-good expressions.

Bishop William Murphy, the chairman of the bishops' conference Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development, in a covering letter, called the document "extraordinary." The presence of two of the nation's most important labor leaders, Cardinal McCarrick and the indomitable Sr. Carol on today's call confirms Murphy?s claim.

[Editor's note: The document, "Respecting the Just Rights of Workers: Guidance and Options for Catholic Health Care and Unions [1]," is available on the USCCB.org web site.]

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