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America realizes unions still exist

Mike Sweitzer-Beckman | Sep. 17, 2010

The National Football League kicked off the regular season last week on Thursday night as the Minnesota Vikings visited the defending Super Bowl champion Saints in New Orleans. There was a lot of hype about how far the city has come, with the Superdome hosting a game five years after it was one of the largest homeless shelters for survivors of Hurricane Katrina. The team's world championship banner was unveiled.

Then came the decisive moment after the National Anthem where several Saints and Vikings players held their forefingers high [1] and looked at each other in a salute. It was meant to be a sign of labor union solidarity among the players -- the owners threatening a lockout at the end of this season. It became a polarizing moment, as only the mention of labor unions in the American workplace can be.

There have been many gripes. From the immediate reaction by Monday Night Football sportscaster Al Michaels ("There's nothing like a labor statement to start the season.") to Mike and Mike on ESPN Radio wishing the players had just played the game.

This is a small window into how labor unions and workers are perceived in the United States.

I admit, even though I am a supporter of labor unions for what they do to strengthen the American workplace, it is difficult to get behind a bunch of millionaires. There are more pressing issues that people in our workforce face that our faith tradition calls us to address.

However, you are unlikely to see such a widely broadcast public display of labor union solidarity as what was shown in New Orleans last Thursday, as it was the most widely watched opening night game in NFL history [2] with 28% of households tuning in.

Only about 12 percent of U.S. workers are unionized. That means that 88 percent of workers do not have a collective voice in the workplace. While talk show hosts have vilified the players for their show of solidarity, in reality, it is 32 NFL owners who are threatening a lockout of the players next season. The players don't want to see this happen and are willing to play under the current collective bargaining agreement until a new one is negotiated.

A lockout would mean 30,000 stadium workers would be locked out of their jobs [3], according to the NFL players union president, DeMaurice Smith. Many of these jobs are the second, third, fourth or fifth jobs for American workers - the types of workers that Catholics should be concerned about if we are to care for those most marginalized and those most in need. Catholics and labor unions used to be synonymous with building a more sustainable society. One hope this virtue can be recovered.

DeMaurice Smith tells us not to think of this as millionaires versus billionaires, though media headlines would try to make that the case. What is at stake? For the football fan, losing a season is at stake. For those concerned about our economy and building a stronger society, then what is at state is the livelihoods of those 30,000 people whose jobs are threatened by 32 owners.

What did I see when Vikings and Saints saluted each other and camera's Thursday night? I saw a perfect time to educate a captive audience and spark conversations among millions of viewers -- not about football, but about labor solidarity.

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