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Labor organizing at Catholic hospitals a touchy issue

Mark Pattison Catholic News Service | Feb. 17, 2011

WASHINGTON -- The issuance of a joint statement in 2009 by Catholic hospitals and labor unions about the right of workers to organize at Catholic hospitals is still waiting for its first application, according to a participant in the drafting of the document.

Jerry Shea, assistant to the president at the AFL-CIO, said the document first got sidetracked when participants agreed to hold back on its release until closer to Labor Day that year.

By then, Shea added, the nation was embroiled in a debate on the merits of health care reform legislation. That debate included a difference of opinion between the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Catholic Health Association on whether the health reform bill passed last March would adequately protect against the possibility of federal funding of abortion and guard the conscience rights of health care providers and institutions.

The statement, "Respecting the Just Rights of Workers: Guidance and Options for Catholic Health Care and Unions," was a joint product of the USCCB, the CHA, the AFL-CIO and the Service Employees International Union, which broke from the AFL-CIO four years ago but is one of the most aggressive unions in the health care organizing field.

At the Feb. 12 annual meeting of the Catholic Labor Network, held in conjunction with the annual Catholic Social Ministry Gathering in Washington, participants were told that health care organizing continues, although not necessarily under the tenets laid out in "Respecting the Just Rights of Workers."

Franciscan Sister Marie Puleo, senior vice president of mission for Steward Healthcare System, a for-profit chain that runs six Catholic hospitals in Massachusetts, outlined a positive working relationship the chain has with SEIU. Both the hospitals and the union see the enemy not as each other, but as the current health care system.

"We even did a retreat together," Sister Puleo said. "Each side took some steps of good faith at the start," including the removal of antagonistic leaders, and agreed on three goals: increased utilization of the hospital by patients, improved labor-management relations, and a push on training and education.

Nina Bugbee, a staff representative for a Teamsters local representing hospital workers at Genesys Regional Medical Center in Flint, Mich., and a former nurse at the hospital, said workers and management enjoyed a similar relationship for about six years until executives at Ascension Health, the nation's largest Catholic hospital chain, "decided two things: The profits weren't big enough at Genesys, and they were going to put the unions in their proper place."

That set off, according to Bugbee, a series of anti-union moves by hospital management, which in turn brought a series of countermoves by the union and its allies, including the publication last year by Interfaith Worker Justice of "Ascension Health: A Fall From Grace -- Workers' Rights Abuses at Ascension Health's Michigan

Hospitals."

Bugbee said that while the booklet stung Genesys and Ascension, the tactic that got management's attention was the Teamsters' backing of a rival hospital's bid to build a new facility in Genesys' territory.

Both parties came back to the bargaining table. The nurses agreed to a new contract -- albeit one with concessions -- but Bugbee claimed that even with the contract, "morale is the lowest it's ever been" at the hospital.

Joyce Moscato, who works for the nurses' division at SEIU headquarters in Washington, said the union and an Ohio Catholic hospital chain, Catholic Healthcare Partners, had devised a system in which neither the union nor the hospital could speak negatively of the other side while SEIU conducted organizing campaigns at the chain's different facilities. Moscato added that business interests were so upset at the pre-vote agreement that they threatened to take swipes at the union during the organizing drives.

Instead, a rival union burst onto the scene three years ago and campaigned against SEIU, according to Moscato. She did not disclose the other union's tactics, because the two unions have since "buried the hatchet," but SEIU called off the elections because of the "confusion" generated by the rival's attacks.

The initial representation votes resumed only last year, Moscato said, and a majority have rejected SEIU, which she attributed to "lingering bad feelings" over the union rivalry.

"For three years, I've been carrying around this St. Anthony medal. It belonged to a respiratory therapist from Springfield," one of the initial organizing targets, Moscato said. "She told me that St. Anthony is the saint you pray to when you've lost something. ... I was going to give it back to her when she got a union. But she doesn't work there anymore, so I'll have to figure out something else to do with it."

The AFL-CIO's Shea said "Respecting the Just Rights of Workers" may yet prove to be useful.

"Unions complained about it because it didn't go far enough. Hospitals complained because it went too far. So we must have done something right," he said.

The document calls on unions and employers to respect "each other's mission and legitimacy" and to pledge not to "demean or undermine each other's institutions, leaders, representatives, effectiveness or motives." Both sides also must be "dedicated to ensuring that organizing campaigns will not disturb patients or interfere with the delivery of patient care," it says.

Shea added the document lays out union and employer conduct as detailed in the National Labor Relations Act of 1935, "but just without all of the horrible legal decisions of the past 40 years."

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