

Bishops and the assault on unions

Richard McBrien | Mar. 28, 2011 Essays in Theology

One of the major elements of Catholic social teaching, ever since 1891 and the publication of Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum* ("Of New Realities?"), has been support of workers to form labor unions.

That right has been endorsed most recently by the current pope, Benedict XVI, in his own 2009 encyclical *Caritas in veritate* ("Love in truth?"). In that document, Pope Benedict-spoke of the "repeated calls issued within the Church's social doctrine, beginning with *Rerum Novarum*, for the promotion of workers' associations that can defend their rights."

These associations or unions "must therefore be honored today even more than in the past, as a prompt and far-sighted response to the urgent need for new forms of cooperation at the international level, as well as the local level." [#25]

However, that fundamental right of workers to bargain collectively with their employers has been under direct attack by the newly elected Republican governors in Wisconsin, Ohio, New Jersey, and various other states.

We tend to forget that because of the persistent efforts of labor unions, we can now take for granted the 8-hour work day, the 40-hour work week, weekends off, paid vacations, child labor laws, and so many other benefits to the general public, whether union members or not.

And yet our bishops are, for the most part, silent on this greatest threat to Catholic social doctrine since the 1930s. In fact, they are, for the most part, sitting on their hands.

If Msgr. George Higgins were still alive, he would be howling at the bishops' lack of concerted action.

Cardinal Joseph Bernardin and so many other bishops of the 1970s and 1980s would have responded strongly to the current crisis. I would include in that number the late auxiliary bishop in my own Archdiocese of Hartford, Joseph F. Donnelly, one of the pioneer labor priests who rose to head Connecticut's Board of Arbitration and Mediation for 15 years and who had the most direct hand in supporting Cesar Chavez's strike in favor of the farm workers of California. Chavez read one of the Scripture readings at Donnelly's funeral in 1977.

In his final column for the Catholic press, published Sept. 21, 2001, Msgr. Higgins quoted his mentor and the mentor of so many others in the Catholic social action movement, Msgr. John Ryan, who wrote these words in the height of the Great Depression in the early 1930s: "Effective labor unions are still by far the most powerful force for the protection of the laborer's rights and the improvement of his or her condition."

Our bishops should be pounding the table with indignation at these latest moves by Republican governors against the rights of workers to bargain collectively, as workers have been able to do since the New Deal reforms of the 1930s.

The unions have been willing to go more than half way with Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker, but he has refused to negotiate. He and other Republican governors around the country are not interested in financial concessions to help deal with their current budget crises.

They are out to break the unions and, in the process, make it easier for supporters like the Koch brothers to operate their conglomerates with no unions to deal with nor intrusive regulations to constrict their corporate behavior. They are interested only in profits, some of which they gladly shovel to Republican candidates like Governor Walker of Wisconsin to keep the various states free of Democratic control.

Archbishop Jerome Listeki of Milwaukee, head of the Wisconsin Catholic Conference, did issue a statement in support of the workers Feb. 16, but he directed it to the members of the Joint Committee on Finance, not to the Governor.

It is a tepid statement at best, which is probably why it received little notice in the national media. It does cite good words from Pope Benedict XVI's encyclical, which I have quoted above, and also contains a helpful brief quote from John Paul II's 1981 encyclical *Laborem exercens* on the importance of labor unions as instruments of social order and solidarity, but it is not a table-pounding statement, nor a ringing call to Catholics to support the protestors who have been advocating for workers' rights.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has also not acted against the new assault on labor unions, beyond a letter of support for Archbishop Listeki's statement by Bishop Stephen Blair of Stockton, California, chairman of the USCCB's Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development.

Msgr. Higgins would not be pleased.

© 2011 Richard P. McBrien. All rights reserved. Fr. McBrien is the Crowley-O'Brien Professor of Theology at the University of Notre Dame.

Editors Note: We read and review every time Fr. McBrien's column "Essays in Theology" is posted to NCRonline.org. Go to this page and follow the directions: <http://www.ncronline.org/blogs/essays-theology/updates-and-appeals-unions> **E-mail alert sign-up** [1]. If you already receive e-mail alerts from us, click on the "update my profile" button to add "Essays in Theology" to your list.

Links:

[1] <http://ncronline.org/email-alert-signup>