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Catholic defense of unions continues to resonate

by Zoe Ryan



Union members in Columbus, Ohio, rally March 1 against a bill that would restrict collective bargaining for public employees. (CNS/Jim West)

One hundred and twenty-nine years ago this Sept. 5, the first Labor Day was celebrated in New York City, according to the Department of Labor's Web site. One hundred and twenty years ago, Pope Leo XIII wrote *Rerum Novarum*, the preeminent encyclical on labor and the church. And seven months ago, Catholics learned or relearned what the church says about labor and unions.

Wisconsin -- where this winter Gov. Scott Walker took away the collective bargaining rights of public employees after a debate that had some Senate Democrats leaving the state to stymie the legislative process and hordes of citizens arriving at the capitol in protest -- may have brought Catholic social teaching on the rights of workers to the forefront, very likely making many Catholics aware for the first time the church's teaching on "the dignity of work and the rights of workers" and the history of the church's strong support for workers' rights and unions.

"The modern church's engagement in society about issues of justice and *caritas* began in 1891 with Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum*," said Stephen Schneck, director of the Institute for Policy Research &

Catholic Studies at The Catholic University of America in Washington.

“Pope Leo saw erosion of human dignity and spiritual life occurring in part from economic forces that reduce the measure of humanity to mere salary, consumerism or production,” Schneck said. “Unions, he thought, were crucial, subsidiary means to protect human dignity from such erosion.”

“Pope Leo’s insights about the importance of unions in 1891 have been reiterated by every subsequent pontiff,” Schneck said.

Following *Rerum Novarum*, the encyclicals with a heavy focus on labor are Pius XI’s *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931), John Paul II’s *Laborem Exercens* (1981) and Benedict XVI’s *Caritas in Veritate* (2009).

The messages continue to resonate. Archbishop Jerome ListECKI of Milwaukee released a statement Feb. 16 expressing the church’s support for the rights of workers: “The church is well aware that difficult economic times call for hard choices and financial responsibility to further the common good. ... But hard times do not nullify the moral obligation each of us has to respect the legitimate rights of workers.”

Unions aren’t perfect, ListECKI wrote, but quoted John Paul that unions are “a constructive factor of social order and solidarity, and it is impossible to ignore it.”

On behalf of the U.S. bishops’ conference, Bishop Stephen Blaire of Stockton, Calif., wrote to ListECKI in support of the Wisconsin bishops in their defense of the rights of workers.



“Your efforts to share the consistent teaching of the church in the

midst of this controversy are an example for all of us on how to apply our moral principles to the “signs of the times,”” Blaire wrote.

According to Joseph McCartin, associate professor of history at Georgetown University in Washington, “Defending labor, if not distinctively Catholic, is nonetheless very Catholic.”

“The Catholic defense of labor is distinctive in part because the church treasures solidarity and sees the expression of solidarity, especially with the poor and exploited, as an act that testifies to the reality of the mystical body of Christ.”

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Currently in the United States, 13.9 million people are unemployed, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics’ economic summary in July. The unemployment rate is at 9.1 percent. The bureau defines a person as unemployed “if they do not have a job, have actively looked for work in the prior four weeks, and are currently available for work.”

Wisconsin has been known as a progressive state in the labor sector: It was one of the first states in the U.S. to enact child labor and an eight-hour workday, and it had the first workers' compensation law in the nation.

McCartin explained how Wisconsin has been a labor battleground since the late 19th century and is a bellwether for trends in labor relations that roil the national political scene.

'The same Wisconsin electorate that made the La Follette family a shining beacon of progressivism in the 1920s and 1930s went on to elevate the unscrupulous anticommunist Joseph McCarthy to national prominence,' he said. 'Wisconsin voters can move from left to right and back more readily than the voters of many states.'

William Lange is a Catholic in the Milwaukee area who started a blog on labor and the Catholic faith in 2009 because he said he thought Catholic social teaching was 'lost.' He is also a former Dominican priest and former activist in a local union.

When Lange was in college, he took classes on Catholic social teaching. When he talks to college students today, he said, he notices that they have no awareness of the church's social teaching and that their Catholic college may have only required one class in it, if that.

Joseph Fahey, a professor of religious studies at Manhattan College in New York and chair of Catholic Scholars for Worker Justice, also noted the lack of awareness of Catholic social teaching among some priests today.

'As one who was in a Catholic seminary and has taught in one I can say that a major problem is that there is very little formation going on in terms of Catholic social teaching for seminarians,' he said. 'Through the years I have found that even well-intentioned priests are simply ignorant about what the church teaches on issues like war and peace and social justice.'

Fahey credits the bishops and the staff of the bishops' conference for their efforts in making Catholic social teaching on justice and peace issues 'known throughout the land.'

The U.S. bishops' Office of Domestic Social Development works on labor issues, and the bishops on the Domestic Justice and Human Development committee have had former AFL-CIO president John Sweeney as a consultant for years, said Kathy Saile, director of the Office of Domestic Social Development.

Labor is intimately tied with immigration, and sometimes members of the middle class feel animosity toward the immigrant population.

'The idea that migrants undercut middle-class, union jobs is utterly misguided,' Schneck said. 'Let's not forget that the very foundation of American unions lies in the waves of past immigration. Indeed, you could make a pretty good case for the decline of unions as a failure of union organizing among today's immigrant workers.'

Fahey pointed out, 'Unions began with advocating the rights of immigrants ... and they became strong precisely because they never forgot that base. Today many unions realize that they need to return to organizing the migrants and the poor.'

The Catholic Labor Network is an organization for Catholics who are 'active in their churches and in

unions to learn about their church's teachings as regards to labor issues, pray for those who are working for economic justice and share information about events and struggles that may be taking place in their area," according to its Web site.

Catholic Scholars for Worker Justice, founded in 2008, is another group dedicated to promoting Catholic social teaching on the rights of workers and, according to the Web site, the "indispensable role that unions play in securing justice" for workers and families, workplaces and the common good.

"Catholic Scholars for Worker Justice ... is a coalition of laypeople, priests and religious who work together to keep the Ryan and Higgins legacy alive. We are proud to stand on their shoulders and to continue their good work," said Fahey, who is cofounder and chair of the group.

Fahey listed famous labor priests throughout the years: Msgr. John Ryan, Msgr. George Higgins, Msgr. John Egan; today some well-known names are Fr. Clete Kiley, Fr. Brian Jordan, Fr. Les Schmidt and Holy Cross Fr. Patrick Sullivan, he said.

"The idea of labor priests -- and there were lots of them in the day -- remains a heroic one among many priests themselves," Schneck said. "Obstacles are there, such as the support for pro-choice politics among many union leaders today, but we might be seeing a new generation of labor priests emerging. I have to mention Fr. Clete Kiley at UNITE HERE, for example."

Kiley, a priest of the Chicago archdiocese, works for UNITE HERE, a union for hotel and restaurant workers. He has served for some years on the board of directors for the Center for Construction Research and Training (formerly called the Center to Protect Workers' Rights), an agency of the Building and Construction Trades Department at the AFL-CIO, and was president and CEO of the Faith & Politics Institute, as well as numerous other positions.

"There seems to be an all-out assault on unions and collective bargaining this year," Kiley said. "The situation of immigrant workers is really alarming as well."

"One thing clear to me is that they [corporate leaders] simply do not want to pay our own citizens living wages and so they "game" the immigration system any way they can," he said. "Again, most ironically, it is the immigrant workers who are then accused of being the ones gaming the system."

The present economy is challenging, he said, "but this year it is also providing an excuse to roll back many of the gains labor unions secured for workers over the past 70 years."

Kiley points to a study recently published by the American Sociological Review, "Unions, Norms and the Rise in U.S. Wage Inequality."

That study "indicated that when labor unions represented 38 percent of the workforce, the middle class grew, and there was greater economic security for both union and non-union workers. It actually established an economic democracy," he said.

"There seem to be strong forces pushing against that today. People ought to care: We are in danger of losing our economic democracy, and setting up an oligarchy, or as someone called it, a corporatocracy."

Fahey said he believes that underlying the decline of unions "is the penchant in our American culture for individualism that holds that I can only benefit myself if I am in competition with others. We need to realize that cooperative cultures where individuals see themselves as part of a wider community do far better than solipsistic cultures like ours."

Sources clarified that Catholic social teaching doesn't support the idea that unions can do no wrong, but that it supports the rights of unions and of workers. So was the Wisconsin unions' cause along the lines of Catholic social teaching?

'The Wisconsin unions sought only to defend their right to bargain collectively,' McCartin said. 'They indicated a willingness to concede on questions of economy, but not on their fundamental right to bargain collectively. Unquestionably, this was a demand protected by Catholic social teaching.'

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Teachings on labor

In a statement issued at Georgetown University in Washington in June 2011, the group Catholic Scholars for Worker Justice highlighted six principles from the Vatican's Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church (2004) regarding labor unions in Catholic teaching:

- 'Unions are indispensable for the universal common good.'
- 'Unions are rooted in the right of free association.'
- 'Unions protect the right to fair wages and benefits.'
- 'Unions foster solidarity through participation and subsidiarity.'
- 'Unions must seek cooperative relations with employers.'
- 'The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops supports labor unions.'

Read more of 'The Core of Roman Catholic Teaching on Workers' Rights' statement at www.catholicscholarsforworkerjustice.org.

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