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Pope's Mexican trip calls to mind corporate injustice

by Tony Magliano

Making a Difference

During the ceremony welcoming Pope Benedict XVI to predominately Catholic Mexico, the leader of the Catholic church offered these words of encouragement to the many Mexicans who suffer numerous injustices: "Confidence in God offers the certainty of meeting him, of receiving his grace; the believer's hope is based on this."

But mindful that those who suffer should not hope in isolation, the Holy Father had words for all of us: "And, aware of this, we strive to transform the present structures and events which are less than satisfactory and seem immovable or insurmountable, while also helping those who do not see meaning or a future in life,"

Among those who do not see meaning or a future in life are many of Mexico's workers whose suffering is largely due to unscrupulous corporations based north of their border.

Charles Kernaghan, executive director of the highly reputable Institute for Global Labour and Human Rights, told me that the North American Free Trade Agreement has given American and Canadian corporations hugely expanded access to the Mexican market, where Mexican workers are exploited as a cheap labor force.

Kernaghan said the multinational corporations that have established themselves in Mexico, being world-class competitors, will employ Mexican workers for as little as they can get away with, place them in miserable working and living conditions, and push them to the limit to maximize production.

A typical example, according to Kernaghan, is the giant U.S. aluminum company Alcoa. In the Mexican border cities of Acuna and Piedras Negras where Alcoa operated 13 factories, more than 15,000 workers earned on average less than \$1 an hour assembling automotive electrical systems for U.S. companies like

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Libby Archell, director of corporate affairs for Alcoa, recently called me to explain that Alcoa now has only three factories operating in Mexico, and that workers there, as in all of their factories worldwide, receive at least the minimum wage mandated by each country. She added that Alcoa fully respects all worker rights everywhere they operate.

But Kernaghan said the many U.S. and Canadian corporations that abuse workers in their foreign factories all say the same thing. These companies all say they respect human and labor rights when in fact, they don't.

And in Alcoa's case, even if the rights of workers are now respected, what about all of the well-documented labor abuses in the Mexican factories they previously owned?

The more than 15,000 former Alcoa workers suffered tremendously, and Alcoa has not given them the restitution that justice demands.

During investigative visits between 2002 and 2007, Kernaghan found many Alcoa workers subsisting in desperate poverty. He saw them living in one-room shacks made of scrap wood, old shipping pallets, cardboard and tar paper, with no running water.

He said a wage of less than \$1 an hour is not nearly enough to live like a human being. To survive, many workers still cross the U.S. border to regularly sell their blood.

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Kernaghan added that many Mexican workers lost their jobs when they spoke out against Alcoa injustices.

Kernaghan said in 2009, Alcoa sold its wire-harnessing plants in Acuna and Piedras Negras. The factories are now owned by PKC Group, which continues to export automotive electrical systems to auto makers in the United States.

But according to local worker rights advocates, conditions have not improved. The workers still earn a base rate of about \$40 a week, and they are not allowed to have an independent, democratic union.

During his visit, Pope Benedict urged Mexicans "not to yield to a utilitarian mentality, which always leads to the sacrifice of the weakest and most defenseless."

But because the globalized economic system in place overwhelmingly favors rich individuals and rich corporations, poor workers in Mexico and throughout the world have little choice but to yield to the utilitarian mentality of most American and Canadian corporations, who treat workers with less dignity than the things they make.

Catholic social teaching insists that workers deserve a living wage and the right to form independent unions.

Therefore, please email U.S. Trade Representative Ron Kirk, urging him to investigate allegations of wage and union-busting abuses Mexican workers suffer under NAFTA, particularly employees now working for PKC Group in Mexico.

[Tony Magliano is an internationally syndicated social justice and peace columnist.]

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