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Catholics and the minimum wage

Maureen Fiedler | Feb. 28, 2014 NCR Today

On *Interfaith Voices* this week [1], with the struggle to raise the minimum wage back in the news, we reviewed the history of that labor struggle -- a history in which American Catholics played a pivotal role.

For me, the show was a bit like a walk down memory lane.

The movement for a minimum wage in the United States caught fire in the 1920s and 1930s. But for Catholics, it really started in 1891. That was the year that Pope Leo XIII issued *Rerum Novarum*, the encyclical that offered a trenchant critique of capitalism, and called for all workers to earn not just a minimum wage, but a ?living wage,? defined as income sufficient to support a spouse and children in the necessities of life.

That document was enormously influential in motivating American Catholics to work for minimum wage legislation which was finally enacted at the national level in 1938 with the Fair Labor Standards Act.

Kim Bobo, executive director of Interfaith Worker Justice, recalled the Catholic ?labor schools? in parishes and schools in the 1930s and 1940s. In the early days, these schools (as well as Jewish lyceums) taught workers about their rights, and about how to form unions.

As chance would have it, I attended a labor school in the late 1950s at De Sales High School in Lockport, N.Y. It was essentially an after-school course over about six weeks, where I learned Catholic social teaching and labor history. I didn?t study how to form a union; local representatives from the AFL-CIO reviewed both Catholic social teaching and the major labor legislation of the 1930s and 1940s.

Another guest on the show, Joseph Fahey of Manhattan College, talked about the Catholic ?labor priests? of the 1930s ? who walked picket lines, led marches with workers and preached labor rights from their pulpits. (New research, he says, has uncovered the names of religious brothers and nuns among the activists.) But I remembered hearing the names of ?labor priests? in the late 1960s when I taught high school in a working class district in Pittsburgh, Pa. Men like Msgr. Charles Owen Rice were revered.

And so today, when the question is raising the minimum wage nationally from $7.25 to $10.10, people of faith who care about social justice are active again. Secretary of Labor Thomas Perez told us about the wide-ranging group of interfaith leaders with whom he met ? all of them advocating a raise in the minimum wage.

Like the 1930s, the struggle is a slog. But in an age when economic disparity is at the top of our national agenda (or should be), religious involvement is key. It?s true: Catholics today lag behind in their knowledge of Catholic social teaching. We need a fast review course reinforced by a strong dose of activism. Maybe we can start a renewal by looking back to the early 20th century for inspiration.

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