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Maryland congregations offer pulpits to low-wage workers

Brian Roewe | Aug. 30, 2013 NCR Today

Throughout Labor Day weekend worship services, 50 Maryland congregations representing 10 different faith traditions will listen to low-wage workers speak about their experiences and efforts to push for fair wages and greater rights.

The event, called Labor in the Pulpits, has been a staple nationwide program of Interfaith Worker Justice since 1996. This year it has set ?Fair Development? as its theme, and 2013 will mark the first year the organization?s Maryland chapter participates. Even planners expect around 20 workers from primarily service industries -- such as hotels, retail shops and restaurants -- to participate.

The fair development theme fits well with the current state of affairs in the Free State, Meghan Cohorst, Maryland IWJ chapter spokeswoman, told *NCR*.

A number of local labor organizations and faith communities have called for private companies receiving state money to implement business practices that have public benefit. In 2007, Maryland became the first state to pass a living wage law [1], which requires certain companies working under state contracts to pay employees an above-minimum wage (current minimum wage $7.25 an hour); as of Sept. 27, that equates to $13.19 an hour, or $9.91 an hour, depending on jurisdiction.

?They should be paying a living wage, they should be respecting workers, and they should just ensure that whatever money is being invested in these big companies also comes back to benefit Maryland and the people who live in it,? Cohorst said.

Catholic parishes participating in the Maryland ?Labor in the Pulpits? program include six Baltimore churches: St. Dominic; Most Previous Blood; St. Anthony of Padua; St. Matthew; St. Francis of Assisi; and St. Mary of the Assumption.

In addition, worship houses of the Jewish, Episcopal, Presbyterian, Baptist, Lutheran, United Methodist and Unitarian faith traditions, as well as the African Methodist Episcopal Church and United Church of Christ, have agreed to offer workers a platform to address their congregations this weekend.

?It's important for religious leaders to be involved in supporting low wage workers because our faith traditions call on us to work for justice for all people; especially those being exploited,? said Deacon Ed Munro of St. Philip?s Episcopal Church in Annapolis -- one of the participating congregations -- in a press release.

?Workers have a right to be treated justly, they deserve to be paid a living wage, they have the right to organize for better pay and benefits, and they certainly have a God given right to be treated with respect and dignity by their employers," he said.

Cohorst said at the services religious leaders typically "will tie in what the biblical teachings are with the reality of people who are right in front of them.? Often, that includes scheduling readings that address labor and using

their homiles to highlight how and why their faith tradition values labor before the workers speak themselves.

Some of those who will address faith communities are workers from the Baltimore Washington International Thurgood Marshall Airport. Since January, workers at the airport?s food and retail outlets have supported the formation of a workers? Bill of Rights that would ensure fair wages and benefits, full-time employment, job security and a right to unionize.

A former employee of an airport restaurant, Matt Mullins said that what he and others have earned is not enough to support their families. National hospitality labor union Unite Here has estimated that food concession employees averaged an annual salary [2] of $15,912.

To have the chance to speak directly to faith communities is an honor, Mullins said.

?It is just another reminder for us to stay strong, because we have the support of our communities behind us,? he said.

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