

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LABOR AND THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

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For over a century the Catholic Church has addressed labor and economic development issues. This is the 120th anniversary of “Rerum Novarum” written by Pope Leo XIII. This document began to build a bridge between worker rights and government and corporations with the goal of achieving economic justice for all.

In 1986, the Catholic Bishops wrote a letter on Economic Justice. Paragraph 3031 of the document states... “As a minimum, workers have a right to be informed in advance when decisions are under consideration, a right to negotiate with management about possible alternatives, and a right to a fair compensation... Since even these minimal rights are jeopardized without collective negotiation, industrial cooperation requires a strong role for labor unions in our changing economy. “workers have a right to be informed in advance about decision under consideration. They also have collective bargaining rights.”

The church documents set up a partnership between church and labor. They need to be renewed in this time, studied and acted upon. Over the years, they have helped many struggling people get out of dire poverty and secure a level of economic security for themselves and their families. In recent years, there has been a decline in the study and implementation of the values outlined in these documents.

In the past few months, in Wisconsin and across the nation, there has been a strong effort to deprive workers of their basic rights and to deprive them of their right to organize and engage in collective bargaining . If this continues, it will impact the efforts of the church and the economic life of our society. The Bishops of Wisconsin on behalf of Archbishop Listeski of Milwaukee states: “Catholic Social Teaching must be restored to its rightful place in the church. These are not just labor issues. They are moral choices with great human and justice consequences.”

Here are some of the things church leaders and people of faith can do to address these issues:

1. Let our legislators know that we cannot balance our state and national budgets on the backs of the poor and disenfranchised, the powerless, the aging and the most vulnerable people in our society. Education and other essential human services should not be deprived of necessary resources to meet their needs. They cannot survive successfully without adequate funding.
2. Keep the common good in mind and develop a clearer Catholic voice in confronting greed and supporting worker rights.
3. Restore the study of the church documents on labor and economic issues in seminaries, colleges, and in parish groups. Encourage the faithful to speak the truth to power with courage and hope.
4. Write letters or articles on the issue and encourage people to become involved.
5. Keep in touch with your legislators and urge them to act justly and for the common good. Invite them to speak to your congregation or other groups to which they belong.
6. Workers also have obligations to provide a fair day's work for a fair day's pay. They have a right to feel that their work is making a difference for their own families, for their communities and nation. No effort is too small to make a difference. In the document on Human Work, we are told that "workers not only want fair pay, they also want to share in the responsibility and creativity of the very work process. They want to feel they are working for themselves – an awareness that is smothered in a bureaucratic system where they only feel themselves to be cogs in a huge machine moved from above." #15, On Human Work".

Let us remind ourselves that the values outlined in the documents named above are not optional suggestions but values to be studied and lived as a core element of living our faith.

Let us begin today with courage and hope.