Opinion

by Fr. Tim Graff

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As a pastor, I hear the struggles of individuals and working families every day, including those who live below the poverty line even though they work full-time. Listening to their stories through my faith perspective compels me to advocate for the dignity of each worker. But it is also the church's history of supporting workers who've been oppressed that inspires me to be vocal about this issue.

Now all of us have a choice to make: whether we will follow our values and history, or not. Today, the U.S. Supreme Court will hear oral arguments in a case that could have a negative impact on working families across the United States.

The crux of *Janus* v. *AFSCME* (American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees) is whether trade unions representing public employees have a right to collect money from people who opt out of joining their designated union. It's important for unions to collect these fees because they’re able to bargain for better wages, for benefits like healthcare and for raising standards for all workers -- including those who are not unionized but are working in industries where there's a strong union presence.

If *Janus* is victorious, all state and local government employment — public employment — will be considered "right-to-work," and unions will be weakened as a result. " Right-to-work " is a misnomer used by people who don't really respect workers' rights. "Right-to-work" laws in fact make it harder for workers to organize and thus they substantially weaken workers' abilities to fight for dignified salaries and benefits. It's my belief that all workers have the right to earn a dignified salary

that would allow them to support themselves and their families and gain a pathway to the middle class. And I believe they have the right to organize so those salaries and benefits are available to them.

For years, I've advocated for our country's working poor: publicly supporting unions like 32BJ SEIU, which represents security guards, food service employees in schools, airport workers and many others in New Jersey and elsewhere. The fact is unions like 32BJ are vital because they not only offer job protections for their members; unions also help lift up the voices not just of their members, but of all workers. Throughout their history, unions have led to safer working conditions; family-sustaining wages; and pensions and benefits, among other victories.

Our church has also stood in solidarity with working people for centuries.

In the late 19th Century, Pope Leo XIII published an encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*, expressing support for human dignity, workers' rights, and labor unions. He knew unions steadfastly advocated for the well-being of workers and their families.

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In the 1940s, Dominican Fr. Jacques Loew pioneered a movement compelling priests to work and live among workers in factories so that they could experience working-class life.

In his 1981 encyclical, *Laborem Exercens*, Pope John Paul II declared that unions were 'indispensable … for the struggle for social justice.''

It's this history of solidarity and social justice work that inspires me to stand with fellow Catholic leaders to ask our Supreme Court justices to preserve union rights: not just for the public sector, but to avoid threats to private-sector organizing in the future.

I live and work to uphold the Second Commandment, which compels us all to "love thy neighbor as thyself." We cannot "love thy neighbor" if we turn a blind eye to income inequality rather than take steps to remediate it.

It's imperative that people in power preserve workers' freedom to stick together and bargain for their rights on the job. 32BJ and others help workers achieve these goals.

They boost families and make entire neighborhoods and communities stronger. I pray you will join me in helping to ensure that those in power take that moral imperative into account.

[Fr. Tim Graff is the director of the Office of Human Concerns for the Archdiocese of Newark in New Jersey, which represents 1.4 million Catholics in 215 parishes in Northeast New Jersey.]