Opinion

News



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Today is the Feast of St. Joseph the Worker, established in 1955 by Pope Pius XII. No doubt, he wanted a Catholic feast to compete with the celebrations of May Day by communist parties throughout the world. Communism has mostly receded in the West, but we Catholics continue to keep this celebration and to reflect on the dignity of workers on this day especially.

Workers have not always been treated with dignity here in the United States and, in many instances, they still are not so treated. Unions did not arise because workers had nothing better to do with their time. They arose because ruthless capitalists treated workers like disposable machinery, useful only insofar as they increased the company's bottom line. The exploitation of the workers by industrial titans like Andrew Carnegie spilled into actual violence when he turned over management to Henry Frick, one of the most notorious union-busters in the late 19th century.

Just last month, workers at Stop & Shop went on strike for 11 days because management wanted to make them pay considerably more for their health care, and to curtail overtime pay on weekends, even though the company was rolling in cash and had used the windfall from the GOP tax cuts mostly to buy back stock, thus enriching the managers and stockholders further. The strike extended over Easter weekend and, consequently, instead of a nice 5 or 6 pound leg of lamb of the kind Stop & Shop carries, I went to a butcher whose smallest leg of lamb was 14 pounds. I am going to be eating lamb for an entire month but it tastes even better knowing that I did not have to cross a picket line to get it. This past week, it has been nice returning to the store and congratulating the workers on their victory. They are glad to be back at work and glad to have gotten a contract that treats them fairly. This is how it should be. This is what dignity looks like.

Last year saw a new energy in the labor movement. Not only did strikes break out across the country but a new kind of strike emerged, a common good strike. Joseph McCartin of the Kalmanovitz Center at Georgetown University wrote about this approach to collective bargaining in which the whole community is involved because the issues transcend the workplace. Teachers from West Virginia to California went on strike not just for higher wages but for more resources for their students and their schools. McCartin wrote:

> If mid-twentieth-century collective bargaining was binary, involving only employers and unions, more recent efforts have sought to give community stakeholders a voice at the bargaining table. If traditional bargaining was done behind closed doors and focused on issues like salary, these fights have been waged in public around broader demands. And if traditional bargaining concluded with signed contracts and the demobilization of the union's membership, these efforts have made bargaining one step in an ongoing strategy of worker and community empowerment.

I can't think of a development more in tune with traditional Catholic social doctrine than this new approach to collective bargaining.

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This new energy in the labor movement is especially welcome in light of the outrageous Supreme Court decision last year in the *Janus* case. Ignoring their promise to respect precedent and instead deciding to let Justice Samuel Alito pursue his pet project, the Supreme Court decided that inappropriately named "right-to-work" laws should apply to public sector unions nationwide. The only good thing to come of that court case was the fact that the U.S. bishops, after some internal wrangling, and in the face of the libertarian advice of people like Ed Whelan of the Ethics and Public Policy Center, stood by the working men and women of this country as they had always done in the past. It was a singular instance of the U.S. bishops' opposing the pan-conservative legal establishment that usually gets whatever it asks for at the bishops' conference, even if it means distorting Church teaching.

There are those who routinely distort church teaching about unions, and Mr. Whelan was only part of a larger choir of Catholics who put their politics ahead of their religion, especially on the role of public sector unions. During the debate about *Janus*, I heard from many conservative friends that Pope Leo XIII never dealt directly with the issue of public sector unions, so perhaps they were not included in his generalized support for unions. This is like saying that because the church does not specify that infidelity to your wife with your officemate is wrong, perhaps that is allowable even while infidelity with your neighbor is wrong. And, in Europe, public sector unions are even more prominent historically and today than in the U.S., and if

the popes had wanted to differentiate between them and private sector unions, they have had ample opportunity to do so. Sadly, some of our conservative friends, like some of our liberal ones, refuse to be challenged by church teaching that conflicts with their politics, and only embrace the parts they like. That is not Catholicism, that is the cafeteria. The Church stands with workers — all of them — and supports their right to form a union even if that union makes decisions with which the church disagrees.

So, today, if you can't get to Mass, at least pray for workers, for their dignity and for a more just society that always places the rights of labor before the rights of capital. And, at some point during the day, turn the volume up on your computer and sing-a-long with this:

[Michael Sean Winters covers the nexus of religion and politics for NCR.]

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