

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

June 23, 2009 at 6:17am

Labor unions, Catholic hospitals reach agreement

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Cardinal McCarrick (CNS photo)

WASHINGTON

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has announced a new step forward for workers at Catholic health facilities: a set of principles to ensure that workers have a fair process to bargain for a better life.

In "Respecting the Just Rights of Workers: Guidance and Options for Catholic Health Care and Unions," the USCCB, in cooperation with Catholic health care providers and the union movement, has laid out guidelines for Catholic health care ministries across the country.

The document means that labor unions and Catholic leaders have reached an agreement designed to end years of bitter hostilities that often surrounded union efforts to organize workers at Catholic hospitals.

"The central actors in these dramas have to be the workers themselves, that's what we feel is the strength of the document," said Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, retired archbishop of Washington, D.C., who helped lead the discussions.

The accord, announced Monday, seeks to apply Catholic teachings that recognize the right of workers to "freely and fairly" decide whether to join a union.

The new guidelines cover seven principles for employers when workers seek a union:

Respect;
Access to information;
Truthful communication;
Pressure-free environment;
Expeditious process;
Honoring employee decisions; and
Meaningful enforcement of these principles.

The guidelines essentially comprise a "peace agreement" between Catholic health care providers and unions in which Catholic hospitals drop their aggressive tactics in fighting unions, such as delays, one-on-one meetings, captive audience sessions, and threats and intimidations, in exchange for a union's pledge not to run a public leverage campaign against the hospitals.

One of the key principles directs both employers and unions to refrain from harassing, threatening, intimidating or coercing workers.

Under the agreement, hospital managers agree not to use "traditional anti-union tactics," including hiring firms, known as union-busters, that work with companies to defeat organizing drives. Unions also agree not to publicly attack Catholic health care organizations during labor campaigns.

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Nearly 600 Catholic hospitals that employ about 600,000 workers are covered under the agreement. Roughly 15 percent of those workers are currently believed to be union members.

The recommendations do not bind individual bishops, hospitals or unions but provide guidance in how they are expected to conduct themselves during union organizing efforts. Union leaders say it will be easier to organize workers at the nation's Catholic health centers if hospital managers abide by the agreement.

"The theme that runs through all of this as far as I'm concerned is the emphasis on workers' rights to organize as part of church teachings," said AFL-CIO president John Sweeney.

Sweeney called it a landmark moment for health care workers. He said the for reaching this agreement was mutual respect for the histories of both Catholic health care and workers' rights.

Parties to the accord include the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Catholic Health Association of the United States, the AFL-CIO and the Service Employees International Union.

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