

Bishops support unions but call for cooperation

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Milwaukee Archbishop Jerome E. ListECKI, pictured after celebrating Mass for Milwaukee pilgrims in Rome in June (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

WASHINGTON -- Amid ongoing battles between Republican governors and organized labor in Midwestern states, U.S. Catholic bishops have echoed the long-standing church tradition of workers' rights.

But they have also noted that there are no easy-fix solutions in today's battered economy. They have urged workers and government officials to work for the common good and called on the members of public employee unions to make sacrifices.

The bishops' words haven't gone unnoticed. Just as this debate has stirred passions across the country, people have criticized the U.S. bishops for either being too supportive of unions or not supportive enough. Catholics on both sides of the issue also have weighed in on what's best for workers and the country as a whole.

"Hard times do not nullify the moral obligation each of us has to respect the legitimate rights of workers," Milwaukee Archbishop Jerome E. ListECKI said in mid-February, during angry protests in Wisconsin over the Gov. Scott Walker's proposal to curb public employees' collective bargaining power for benefits and increase the premiums they pay for health care and their pension contributions.

After a three-week standoff that brought tens of thousands of protesters to Wisconsin's state capitol, the state's Senate Republicans passed the governor's plan March 9, bypassing Democratic senators who fled the state to block the legislation. The next day, the state Assembly passed a slimmed-down version of the bill that stripped nearly all collective bargaining rights from public workers.

The country has been watching Wisconsin as a possible indicator of a larger trend since legislatures in Ohio, Indiana, Iowa, Idaho, Tennessee, Kansas and Michigan also are looking at ways to curb union rights.

Currently in the United States, more than one-third of public employees -- including teachers, police and civil service workers -- belong to unions, while only 6.9 percent of private-sector workers are unionized.

In the debate's early stage, Archbishop ListECKI balanced his remarks by saying that not "every claim made by workers or their representatives is valid" and that unions need to "make sacrifices when required" in adjusting to "new economic realities." His statement was issued on behalf of the state's bishops and released by the Wisconsin Catholic Conference.

Bishop Stephen E. Blaire of Stockton, Calif., chairman of the U.S. bishops' domestic policy committee, called the statement a "timely reminder of what the church teaches on the rights and duties of workers."

President Barack Obama has been mostly quiet on the issue but gave a nod to unions in the Wisconsin battle, telling a Milwaukee television station that attempts to make it harder for public employees to engage in collective bargaining "seems like more of an assault on unions." Federal law does not allow U.S. government workers a right to collective bargaining over wages and benefits.

Wisconsin's capital city of Madison, the epicenter of the labor debate, was also where people were looking for the church's response. A statement on Madison's diocesan website in mid-February said "any report or claim stating that the church stands on one side, or another, of this issue is mistaken."

This message was reiterated by Madison Bishop Robert C. Morlino in recent columns in the Catholic Herald, the diocesan newspaper. In the ongoing dispute, he said there was no definitive answer based on church teaching.

"Some people think that the teaching of the church is, 'Support unions in every time, in every place, in every situation, no matter what,'" he wrote. "However, this is not the teaching of the church."

In Ohio, legislation to limit unions' collective bargaining rights was recently passed by the Senate and is awaiting action by the House. The state's bishops have reiterated church teaching on labor, saying workers deserved just wages and benefits, decent working conditions and the ability to organize and engage in collective bargaining.

In the Feb. 28 statement, issued by the Ohio Catholic Conference, the bishops also urged that "unions and management work for the common good, to make sacrifices when required and to adjust to new economic realities."

The church's position on labor is spelled out in papal encyclicals from 1891 to 2009. Pope Leo XIII's ("Rerum Novarum") ("Of New Things") in 1891 argued that workers had rights to a good wages and a decent work environment. Pope John Paul II's 1981 encyclical, "Laborem Exercens" ("On Human Work") called labor unions a "mouthpiece for the struggle for social justice." And Pope Benedict XVI's "Caritas in Veritate" ("Charity in Truth") in 2009 said workers' unions should be "honored today even more than in the past."

Church teaching on work has always been "quite clear and quite consistent," Clayton Sinyai, treasurer of the Catholic Labor Network, told Catholic News Service March 4.

He said one positive aspect of the current debate about unions is that it has provided "an educational moment for the country" and made people think about "the importance of collective bargaining."

Joseph Fahey, professor of religious studies at Manhattan College in New York and chairman of Catholic Scholars for Worker Justice, agreed, comparing the focused attention on workers to a "great awakening."

He said in previous generations, more priests and bishops might have been visible in the picket lines, but even if they weren't today, he was impressed with the way Catholic social teaching on labor has been vocalized. He said

Catholics and non-Catholics seem aware of church teaching on workers' rights and the function of work.

But the discrepancy between the church's teaching on labor and barred unions at some Catholic hospitals and diocesan schools has not gone unnoticed.

Sinyai said he is asked about this by labor organizers, and Fahey said it "breaks my heart."

Father Robert Sirico, president of the Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty, an economics think tank based in Grand Rapids, Mich., said unions should not necessarily get unilateral support from Catholics.

On the organization's website March 2, the priest from the Diocese of Kalamazoo, Mich., said there is a "long-standing bias in Catholic social teaching toward unions" that he found exaggerated.

"Just because something is called a union does not make it automatically good and moral," he said, noting that Catholics need to ask themselves if the unions they support are "the same type that are idealized in Catholic social teaching."

As a case in point, he mentioned a teacher who was a union member who was opposed to his union dues being used to support candidates who support laws in favor of abortion.

Sifting through questions about unions and their place within church tradition and modern life does not always yield easy answers.

David Gregory, executive director of the Center for Labor and Employment Law at St. John's University School of Law in Queens, N.Y., hopes to shed some light on this topic at an upcoming conference at the Vincentian school: "The Theology of Work and the Dignity of Workers Conference."

The March 18-19 conference, bringing church and labor leaders together, has been planned for months, long before unions were a hot news topic.

Gregory hopes the "timeless truth" of the church's voice for labor will be "made more timely" as people more fully understand it.

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