

Where's the Catholic leadership in Wisconsin?

Mike Sweitzer-Beckman | Mar. 23, 2011

On some levels, Madison has been the place to be lately. The last five weeks have brought unprecedented numbers of people down to the capitol square, first to protest Governor Scott Walker's 'budget repair bill' and then to protest his actual proposed biennial budget.

Several issues have been raised, from ending the ability for public employee unions to collectively bargain beyond their wages, to cuts in BadgerCare (the state's health insurance program for low-income people), to ending the state-mandated recycling program that was implemented under Wisconsin's last Republican governor, Tommy Thompson.

I've recently been caught up in a of couple dialogues about why no Catholics are involved in these protests, and why Catholic social teaching is not front and center in this debate in the religious community.

At first, I got a bit defensive. The Wisconsin Catholic Conference (led by Milwaukee Archbishop Jerome Listekki) came out with a statement in support of labor unions so long as they are acting in the interests of the common good. You can read the statement [here](#) [1].

My understanding of the Wisconsin Catholic Conference is that the five bishops in Wisconsin act together to make statements about public policy issues and that the organization is chaired by the bishop of the largest diocese, which is Milwaukee.

Another reason that I was baffled as to why the public didn't see Catholic involvement in this issue is because of Catholic involvement with the [Interfaith Coalition for Worker Justice of South Central Wisconsin](#) [2]. (Full disclosure: I serve on that organizations' board of directors).

Worker Justice is part of a national network of local affiliates that organize the religious community to advocate for better working conditions in the American workplace. There are a few of us Catholics who are involved with this organization, including the board chair. He has been instrumental in urging the Wisconsin Catholic Conference to come out with a statement in favor of labor unions. He's also been involved in many negotiations with statewide and national unions, asking them to put more funding into organizing the religious community to be more involved in grassroots efforts to advocate for budgets that support lower- and middle-income people.

My involvement has been to revamp the Web site to make it more useful. It has seen unprecedented levels of traffic for people looking for more information on a prayerful presence at the state capitol, with several days of over 100 visitors per day (we usually saw less than 10 visitors per day before the governor introduced his budget repair bill).

On the flip side, I started to realize why the public doesn't see the Catholic support for public unions in Wisconsin. There were many religious clergy who led prayer services inside the capitol building, and several others that spoke on the stage in front of tens of thousands of protesters, including the Right Rev. Steven A. Miller, Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Milwaukee.

None of these public faces of clergy, however, were Roman Catholics.

Then a fellow named Frank Coccozelli forwarded me his blog post on the Talk to Action website, entitled '[Bishop Morlino and the Mystery of Madison](#) [3].'

I think Frank did a great job pointing out the neutrality of the Catholic Bishops' stance on the issue of whether to support public unions, especially that of Madison Bishop Robert Morlino.

When perusing the [Madison diocese's Web site](#) [4], it becomes clear that Morlino would prefer not to take a stance on the issue of supporting public unions, even though readers of Catholic Social Teaching documents are quick to point out the unequivocal support that *Rerum Novarum* lends to the support of labor unions.

Commentators responding to Coccozelli's post point out that of course Morlino doesn't want to support unions -- he has no desire to see unions in the Catholic schools in the Madison diocese.

I haven't done enough research to know the background on that. However, a few things have become clear to me.

There is strong, clear support by Catholics for labor unions during the current challenges in Wisconsin. However, this support is primarily coming from leaders within the church and Roman Catholic women religious.

There is a divide between the Catholic lay leaders and the Roman Catholic bishops in Wisconsin on this issue. This brings up differences in opinion on ecclesiology and what is most important: having lay, grassroots leadership on an issue or leadership from the top down.

One thing is clear: having a bishop with a collar on speaking from the stage would have much more of an impact for the role of the church than a bunch of lay leaders who are at the forefront of the behind-the-scenes work on this issue.

[Mike Sweitzer-Beckman recently earned his master of divinity degree from the Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley, Calif. He lives with his wife in his hometown in Wisconsin and co-founded the blog [www.youngadultcatholics-blog.com](#) [5].]

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Links:

[1] <http://www.wisconsinatholic.org/Right%20of%20Workers%20Statement%20Feb%2016,%202011.pdf>

[2] <http://www.workerjustice.org/>

[3] <http://www.talk2action.org/story/2011/3/17/15419/0115>

[4] <http://www.madisondiocese.org/>

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