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Minnesota archbishop becomes a union buster

Tom Gallagher | Jun. 22, 2012 NCR Today

The conservative Archbishop John Nienstedt of St. Paul-Minneapolis is channeling his inner Scott Walker, the controversial, union-busting Republican governor of neighbor Wisconsin. Archbishop Nienstedt is unilaterally terminating [1] the archdiocese's Catholic newspaper union. This really comes as no surprise given the tenor of these Tea Party Catholic times. Instead of working through whatever managerial challenges the archbishop might have had with the 13-member newspaper guild, he just disbands it.

And with a presumably straight face, he puts forward a worker-protection policy implemented by his predecessor, Archbishop Harry Flynn, called "Justice in Employment," which created certain safeguards for archdiocesan employees prior to being fired. Back in early 2009, I wrote an *NCR* story [2] about the Archdiocese of St. Paul-Minneapolis' Justice in Employment policy.

The purpose of Justice in Employment was to eliminate cases where a new pastor unilaterally fires the janitor or the cook or a case where a principal comes in and fires a teacher without any due process or an opportunity for improvement, and so on. The purpose of Justice in Employment was not to bust up unions. And it didn't. The policy has worked well alongside the existence of the 13-member newspaper guild.

Also in 2009 I wrote a story [3] on whether church employees have any benefits or rights in the event that they are fired by dioceses, parishes and schools. Not much.

Meanwhile, the Fortnight for Freedom rolls on. Jeesh.

The nonprofit, nonpartisan MinnPost.com reports [1]:

> In what appears to be one of those "Do what I say, not what I do" moves, the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis is giving the boot to a union that has been negotiating contracts with the church for nearly half a century.
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> The union, the Newspaper Guild, has represented editorial and advertising employees of the Catholic Spirit, a bimonthly publication of the archdiocese, since 1965. But that relationship is to end next week, when the Spirit's current contract expires.
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> The 13 union employees have been told the Spirit and most of its employees are being folded into the archdiocesan Office of Communications "to create a more integrated communications function."
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> Because the Spirit is an entity of the church, the union can't fight this decision through normal National Labor Relations Board channels.
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> According to Bucsko, precedence shows that the NLRB would duck taking on the issue, saying the church has First Amendment rights to deal with religious issues.
>
> That leaves few options for the union in its fight for survival.

One effort will be a rally on Sunday morning from 9:30 to 11:30 outside the Cathedral in St. Paul, urging the archdiocese to reconsider its decision. The union is seeking support from members of the more than 200 parishes in the archdiocese.

I've asked the archdiocese to respond to Sunday's rally and the general situation and will update with its comments.

The union also has tried using the church's long history of supporting the union movement in pleading with Archbishop John Neinstedt to reconsider this unilateral change in working conditions.

In a letter to Nienstedt earlier this month, Bucsko cited that history. In his letter, Bucsko included the words of the late Pope John Paul II, a union supporter.

In writing about labor issues, John Paul II had this to say: "All these rights, together with the need for the workers themselves to secure them, gives rise to yet another right: The right of association, that is to form associations for the purpose of defending the vital interest of those employed in the various professions."

Bucsko also told Nienstedt that the Spirit and the guild traditionally had the support of archbishops.

"The union was formed at the request of its then-editor, the late Bernard Casserly ... That representation has continued with Archbishop Emeritus Harry Flynn and you."

Nienstedt responded to Bucsko's letter, with a letter of his own.

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