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Shame in Michigan

Michael Sean Winters | Dec. 12, 2012 Distinctly Catholic

Michigan?s Republican-controlled legislature slammed through so-called, and misnamed, ?right-to-work? laws yesterday and Republican Governor Rick Snyder signed them into law. Michigan, home of the United Auto Workers, scene of the Flint sit-down strike in the 1930?s, became the twenty-fourth state in the Union to adopt these flawed laws.

This is a defeat for social justice of enormous significance. Workers in states with ?right-to-work? laws make about $1,500 less than workers in states that respect union rights. (And, it is more than a little ironic that the Michigan-native who lost the election, lost in part because of his comments about 47% of Americans being moochers, while ?right-to-work? laws actually create a new class of moochers, those who benefit from a union?s representation but don?t want to pay for that service.) Proponents of the laws have been saying all weekend that the measures will make Michigan ?more competitive.? Well, how is that? Because if companies can pay their workers less in Michigan, they are more likely to invest in Michigan. There is some truth in that, but it is not a moral truth. The challenge should be to raise wages for workers in states that pay less, not engage in a race-to-the-bottom in which Bangladesh will always win.

Just the other day, I quoted Pope Benedict on the subject of the importance of unions, but let?s hear from the Holy Father again:

The global market has stimulated first and foremost, on the part of rich countries, a search for areas in which to outsource production at low cost with a view to reducing the prices of many goods, increasing purchasing power and thus accelerating the rate of development in terms of greater availability of consumer goods for the domestic market. Consequently, the market has prompted new forms of competition between States as they seek to attract foreign businesses to set up production centres, by means of a variety of instruments, including favourable fiscal regimes and deregulation of the labour market. These processes have led to a downsizing of social security systems as the price to be paid for seeking greater competitive advantage in the global market, with consequent grave danger for the rights of workers, for fundamental human rights and for the solidarity associated with the traditional forms of the social State. Systems of social security can lose the capacity to carry out their task, both in emerging countries and in those that were among the earliest to develop, as well as in poor countries. Here budgetary policies, with cuts in social spending often made under pressure from international financial institutions, can leave citizens powerless in the face of old and new risks; such powerlessness is increased by the lack of effective protection on the part of workers' associations. Through the combination of social and economic change, trade union organizations experience greater difficulty in carrying out their task of representing the interests of workers, partly because Governments, for reasons of economic utility, often limit the freedom or the negotiating capacity of labour unions. Hence traditional networks of solidarity have more and more obstacles to overcome. The repeated calls issued within the Church's social doctrine, beginning withRerum Novarum[1], for the promotion of workers' associations that can defend their rights must therefore be honoured today even more than in the past, as a prompt and far-sighted response to the urgent need for new forms of cooperation at the international level, as well as the local level.

I cannot think of a finer summation of the moral implications for what we are told are inexorable market forces, economic ?laws,? and why unions are part of the solution, needed ?even more than in the past.?

Politically, the Democrats and unions are still paying the price for the disastrous 2010 midterm elections. It was during the 2010 campaign, long before the HHS mandate, that I soured on President Obama. He was unwilling or unable to articulate a defense of his policies, and he did not deploy his obviously well-tuned grassroots operation to maintain control of the House of Representatives or control of key swing states? legislatures. To have failed to do this in an election after which re-districting would be undertaken was a political sin of the worst kind. In some sense, we will be paying for that sin for a full decade.

That said, I think Gov. Snyder and his Republican allies in the Michigan legislature have over-reached. They did not run for office on this union-busting platform. They passed it through the legislature without any public hearings or committee meetings. Just as Obamacare riled up the GOP base, measures like this rile up the Democrats? base. President Obama, who never needs his get-out-the-vote operation again for himself, needs to put it at the disposal of local Democratic parties so that, within two years time, we can overturn union-busting laws like this and those passed in Indiana and Wisconsin.

It was especially disheartening to see no statement from the Michigan Catholic Conference. Lord knows, if Michigan had passed anything to do with contraception we would have heard about it quickly enough. If the bishops of Michigan are not going to stand up and defend 120 years of explicit papal social teaching on the importance of unions, shame on them. If they are not going to defend their own people in the pews from this corporate effort to drive down wages, shame on them. If the bishops of Michigan cannot see that one of the greatest achievements of the Catholic Church in the United States was that we did not lose the working classes in the late 19th and early 20th century as the Church in Europe did, and defend that achievement, shame on them.

And, seeing as the bishops have had their cassocks in a knot about the integrity and autonomy of the Church?s institutions in the battle over the HHS mandate, can they not see how the issue of union rights is related to the issue of the Church?s rights? At one level, they cannot see the connection because they listen to too many

Republicans, and only to Republicans, who prefer not to make such connections. But, here it is. The Church?s objection to the HHS mandate is fundamentally about the right of the Church to decide for herself how she wants to conduct her own affairs. The Church?s fight is not about individual rights, it is about the right ordering of society, in which the Church and others social groups are not mere extensions of the State. Unions are one of those other groups that make for a robust civil society. They should be entitled to make their own rules without excessive governmental interference.

The ?libertas ecclesiae? was exiled from Anglo-Saxon common law when Henry VIII decided he wanted to divorce his wife and needed to divorce his realm from the Church to get rid of the Mrs. Consequently, as Lew Daly pointed out in this brilliant article last year [2], the idea of corporate rights, as opposed to individual rights, have little sway in America?s legal and political traditions.

In corporatist thinking, natural associations?including the family, religious bodies, occupational guilds and trade unions, and various other communal structures?should be legally enfranchised in their corporate nature, empowered as both subjects and creators of public policy, and protected as vital instruments of the common good. Corporatism addresses issues as fundamental as family formation and faith-based social services, and as a heritage of the guild system, it was also a source of modern labor law and industrial policy.

In America, corporatism of this sort, this Catholic sort you might call it, is at a disadvantage because business corporations, for legal purposes, are considered as individuals, and possess all the rights that attend to an individual. Unions, as we saw yesterday, are at the mercy of political forces determined to destroy them.

Shame on the Michigan Catholic Conference, then, not only for failing to defend the Church?s teaching regarding unions, but for failing to make the point that our defense of labor rights is of a piece with our defense of the Church?s rights. Shame, too, on those champions of religious liberty among the conservative Catholic laity who will not dare to speak ill of a Republican even though the implications of the Michigan laws for the Church?s fight for religious liberty are obvious, very obvious. What?s the matter Professor Farr, still looking for James Madison?s Catholic baptismal certificate? Mr. Weigel, no defense of civil society from you? Professor George, cat got your tongue?

Shame. Shame. Shame.

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