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Union father inspires priest's stand with miners

by Brian Roewe

Sitting on the pavement wearing a clear plastic poncho, Fr. Andy Switzer knew the drill.

The rain-soaked labor rally held July 9 at Fairmont State University in Fairmont, W.Va., had just concluded as police arrested him and 29 others sitting in the street adjacent to a football practice field that hosted more than 5,000 miners and supporters from eight states. Through a pre-arranged deal, police handcuffed the protesters and transported them to the station, where the union paid their bails.

The same procedure had taken place two months earlier at a rally in St. Louis, where Switzer, associate pastor of St. Margaret Mary Parish in Parkersburg, W.Va., first volunteered to be arrested in a sign of solidarity with 23,000 miners and their families at risk of losing long-term health care benefits as part of the Patriot Coal bankruptcy proceedings.

On Aug. 16, Patriot mine members of United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) voted to ratify a settlement amending a bankruptcy judge's order that the company could abandon past collectively bargained obligations. Though the agreement whittles wage cuts to \$1 per hour, the union said it still lacks the resources necessary to provide lifetime health benefits to pensioners. The mine workers have sought to have those benefits fulfilled through legislation and lawsuits aimed at Peabody Energy and Arch Coal, which they accuse of creating Patriot as a "designed-to-fail" spinoff to relieve more than \$1.6 billion in "cradle to grave" liabilities. Both Arch and Peabody repeatedly have denied the allegations.

For Switzer, the Fairmont rally -- held a year after Patriot declared bankruptcy and just a hill away from one of its mines -- became a homecoming of sorts. A decade earlier, he attended the school located miles from his family's Morgantown, W.Va., home. In the crowd he saw a former professor, and a high school classmate sat beside him in the paddy wagon.

Then there was his father, Mark -- a coal miner and union representative throughout a 20-year career -- who was arrested as well.

Baptized at age 5 and ordained a priest in June 2011, Switzer, 34, first heard the calling to the priesthood as a boy and again in high school. Upon graduating from Fairmont State with a history degree, he decided to enter St. Mary's Seminary in Baltimore.

Prior to studying the church's dogma, though, Switzer saw its tenets through the lens of labor unions.

"Before I knew Catholic social teaching, being at rallies, watching my dad organize, watching what was happening, I was learning [it]," he told *NCR*.

Switzer remembered attending rallies at a young age and witnessing the sacrifices his dad made as a union rep to ensure the rights of others.

"He says that's where he started learning social justice," Mark Switzer said. "He learned a lot of labor songs -- I don't know if that's what taught him social justice or not."

Fr. Andy Switzer also remembered his family's struggles after his father's mine closed in 1991, and how the community supported them after the layoff, and again after his brother Benjamin died at age 5. In those moments, he saw the church he would serve as a priest.

At St. Mary's Seminary, Switzer dived into Catholic social teaching and liberation theology. The themes from each resonated with what he had learned of West Virginia's often contentious mining history, filled with grueling chapters, including the late-1980s Pittston strikes where Mark Switzer campaigned for the union and faced arrest alongside Cecil Roberts, the current UMWA president. When Andy learned of the Patriot dispute, he heard his own call to serve the miners.

"The whole picture became clear to him -- what he needed to do and where he needed to take a position," Mark said.

In the spring, Andy and Mark attended an April 1 rally in Charleston, W.Va. The priest spoke with retired miners, learning their stories and the importance of health benefits.

"He connected with them immediately and took up the call," his father said.

Through Mark's friends who are still in union leadership, Andy spoke at an April rally in St. Louis, and then returned to the city a month later to be arrested for the first time.

"He didn't even blink," recalled John Lonetti, assistant to the union president, when he asked Fr. Switzer if he would consider the prospect of arrest.

For Switzer, the decision didn't come quickly, and he turned to prayer, discernment and spiritual direction to reach it. In the end, he felt compelled to get involved. That the St. Louis rally occurred just two days after Pentecost connected current events with a core mission of the church, he said, "to move out and take up the issues that real people are dealing with."

"Jesus had a mission of healing, and the first disciples and apostles carried out that ministry of healing, and they ended up in prison over it," he told *NCR*, before referencing Pope Francis' call for an imperfect

church "that goes out on to the streets."

Switzer's presence at rallies "sends a message ... that the Catholic church is behind workers and their families," said Lonetti, arrested with Switzer in St. Louis just blocks away from Peabody's downtown headquarters.

Switzer has called presence "the most important ministry," one where he constantly learns from those he serves, from the miners on buses and at rallies, to the people at Morgantown's Ruby Memorial Hospital, where he served as a chaplain.

Going forward, the young priest doesn't foresee his presence in future arrests, uneasy with their prearranged nature. Whatever the next step, though, Mark Switzer knows his son will stand for what he believes is right.

"It's just rewarding that you spend your life putting your efforts into these things, and then see kids rise up and take leadership roles, and it just blows you away. It really does," Mark said.

Andy said, "Maybe he's sees a little of a young him in me, but as we went on, I think he's seen that this is something that I've felt called to do."

"It's not just a coal issue. It's a Catholic social justice issue for me," he said.

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