

# Labor: A Two-Edged Sword for Church

By Religious News Service

Labor relations, including the right of workers to form unions and bargain collectively, have traditionally been given attention by Churches. This continues to be the case, but increasingly Church groups are finding themselves on the receiving end of labor protests.

Several Roman Catholic dioceses are involved in disputes with unions engaged in membership drives in schools. These situations have also involved the question of church-state separation, as the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) has issued rulings directing the diocesan authorities to hold elections and bargain with the unions.

At the same time, the question of whether workers should have the right to object to joining a union on religious grounds is still a live one. And several religious groups have joined in supporting a boycott against the J.P. Stevens Company, a huge textile firm which has attempted to thwart organizing efforts of the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union.

Americans United for Separation of Church and State, an agency which has often been at odds with Roman Catholic leaders on issues involving state aid to non-public schools, has supported the Archdiocese of Philadelphia in its dispute with the NLRB over an election involving union representation of lay teachers in archdiocesan elementary schools.

An NLRB-ordered election was held among the lay teachers June 14. Before that, however, Andrew Leigh Gunn, executive director of Americans United, sent a telegram to the NLRB protesting its "interference" in parochial school employment practices.

Using the same arguments given by archdiocesan officials, Gunn said, "The United States Supreme Court has ruled that the parochial school is an integral part of the religious mission of the Catholic Church. There is no constitutional mandate for the National Labor Relations Board to intrude into the hiring and personnel practices of educational institutions which are integral to a Church's mission."

Msgr. Olin J. Murdick, secretary for education of the U.S. Catholic Conference, says two issues are involved in such disputes. On the one hand, he says, is the right of teachers to organize "and all that entails," and on the other is the right of the Church to "deal with its own personnel, free from undue interference by any agency of government."

A subcommittee on teacher unionization of the U.S. Catholic bishops conference has prepared a working paper which reaffirms the Church's teaching that workers have a right to organize, bargain collectively, and determine whether they will affiliate with a union. The paper, which will be presented to the bishops' plenary meeting in November, also expresses concern about NLRB intervention into Church affairs.

Several religious groups have joined an effort to press the J.P. Stevens Company to change its labor practices. The firm, which has 45,000 workers at 85 plants, has been found guilty of violating the National Labor Relations Act 13 times.

At the annual meeting of the company in March, shareholder resolutions supported by the World Division of the United Methodist Board of Global Ministries and by four Roman Catholic groups received more than 5.5 per cent of the shares voted. A boycott of J.P. Stevens products has been supported by the Catholic Committee on Appalachia and the ecumenical Commission on Religion in Appalachia.

Several letters to the United Methodist Church's World Division following the J.P. Stevens meeting charged that the Church agency had been "used" by the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union. The resolutions which had been supported by the World Division asked the company to publicize information about its labor practices and placement of minorities in its work force.

## It's United

The Monroe County Cancer and Leukemia Association Board of Directors, in a unanimous vote, has changed its name to United Cancer Council, Inc.

Donald Kneeland, Chairman of the Public Relations Committee,

presenting the new name in the June Board meeting, said, "A more distinctive name will reduce confusion with other organizations in the community," and "regionalization is in line with expansion of the United Community Chest to Wayne, Ontario and Orleans counties."



Church groups often find themselves in support of labor in one situation, management in another. The 1973 confrontation between the Farm Workers' Union and the Teamsters, above, was a unique union versus union situation in which delegates at the 9th General Synod of the United Church of Christ supported the Farm Workers. (RNS)

Responding to the criticisms, Florence Little, treasurer for the World Division, said, "The support of the union is not our basic concern. We're concerned about the right of J.P. Stevens employees to engage in collective bargaining without harassment, as included in our United Methodist Church Social Principles."

Although many denominations support the right of workers to unionize and bargain collectively, some specifically oppose unions. Rep. John N. Erlenborn (R-Ill.) has pointed out that at least seven religious groups — the largest being the Seventh-day Adventists — proscribe union membership.

The legislator, who is a Roman Catholic, has sought to persuade Congress to adopt a measure which would provide that employees "who are members of and adhere to teachings of a bona fide

religion which has historically held conscientious objections to joining or financially supporting unions will not be required to do so, but may be required to contribute the equivalent in dues and fees to a non-religious entity."

In contrast, one of the recommendations made to the U. S. Catholic bishops at the "Call to Action" conference in Detroit last Fall urged opposition to the "right to work" laws which are in effect in 20 states.

The National Right to Work Committee organized a protest against the recommendation, which resulted in the sending of hundreds of letters to Archbishop Joseph L. Bernardin of Cincinnati, president of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. At their Spring meeting in Chicago, the bishops referred the resolution to a committee.

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