

Unions

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strike centered on the miners' struggle to gain reinstatement of medical benefits for widowers, pensioners and disabled miners, lost when Pittston's contract with UMWA expired in 1988.

From the start, the UMWA — which has seen its share of bloody battles with coal companies — chose a deliberate strategy of non-violence to compel the company to meet their demands. Such a tactic, along with the reason behind the miners' strike, drew organized religion into the struggle, noted Anthony Flaccavento, director of the Appalachian Office of Justice and Peace for the Catholic Diocese of Richmond, Va.

"A lot of church people did get in and get deeply involved and a big part of that was that the union was committed to non-violence," Flaccavento told the *Catholic Courier*. The director said the reasons behind the union's choice of non-violence had more to do with strategy than with a love of one's enemies. But he observed that the tactic had nonetheless paid off in making both strikers and religious workers more aware of the moral dimensions of their struggle.

Dolores Booker was one such Catholic whose faith was deepened through the strike. Secretary to Flaccavento's office, Booker noted that the Catholic Church and other religious groups played a significant role in supporting the miners' nonviolent struggle through months of duress.

"I think that the nuns, the priests, the area preachers being on the picket line with the workers ... helped them realize there is going to be a light at the end of the tunnel,

and we don't have to physically fight for it," she told the *Courier*.

Booker speaks from experience. Her husband had worked in the mines for 17 years and was laid off before the strike began. The alliance between religion and labor in the Pittston strike had a payoff that can't be measured by any union contract, she said.

"There are some (miners) who have seen they can walk away from this with their dignity intact," she said, asserting that miners had been harassed by company security forces and state police. "I do think with the success of the strike ending that most of the men and their families realized we really are a force ..."

In Rochester and Brockport, religious and community leaders have been supporting workers at Kleen Brite Laboratories, Inc., in their attempts to persuade management to bargain with the union they voted to represent them, the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers' Union.

Under an umbrella organization called the Community Coalition for Workers' Rights, several Protestant and Catholic churches, along with individuals and community groups, have called upon Kleen Brite to end its refusal to meet with union representatives, since the union came in 1988.

The coalition's steering committee includes two Catholic sisters, a priest, and the diocesan director of urban services, Rebecca Gifford. Kurt Edelman, the union's organizer for Kleen Brite, credited the coalition for raising the visibility of the union's struggle.

"Every time we have a meeting, people comment one way or another about the

community support we have," Edelman remarked, adding that such support can sway public opinion about a union's efforts to organize. "I'm sure the general public cares a great deal about what stand religious groups take," he said.

Bob Guzak, a Kleen Brite employee and a member of the union's bargaining committee, echoed Edelman's comments. "I'm sure (the coalition) has helped us be noticed," he said. "They helped us a lot with rallies."

Father David Reid, assistant pastor at St. Peter and Paul Parish, has been present at many of those rallies, and noted that his work on the coalition's steering committee stems from a belief in workers' rights.

"My concern is not necessarily to support a union," the priest said. "My concern is to support workers' rights. Our instrument is to support the union."

Father Reid's comments allude to the fact that unions and the church often come together on issues of workers' rights, but don't always see eye-to-eye on other matters. For example, the diocese has decided not to support an effort to decriminalize use of illegal drugs undertaken in the past two years by some members of the Rochester Area Labor & Religion Committee, according to Ken Maher, director of the Catholic Family Center's Department of Peace and Justice.

Drug decriminalization "really wasn't particularly germane to the Religion and Labor Committee," Maher said, noting that his office explored the matter with three physicians of differing political persuasions. All three opposed drug decriminalization, and Maher himself said, "it's really not a labor issue."

The committee's co-chairman, Ray

Samson, acknowledged the validity of Maher's criticisms, but said decriminalization is an issue that crosses into such areas as workers' privacy rights in matters of employee drug testing.

Nonetheless, Samson noted, the committee won't take an official stance on the issue because no consensus has been reached among its members. The committee will then be spared the possible ire of Monsignor Higgins, who recently chided the AFL-CIO for considering a resolution supporting a pro-choice position on abortion.

"I don't think it would be healthy at all to have a debate in the trade union movement on the ethics of the abortion issue," Monsignor Higgins told the *Catholic Courier* in a telephone interview from his Washington office. He added, however, that he didn't think the AFL-CIO would take action on the matter any time soon.

Differences aside, most religious groups and unions have much to learn from each other, according to Monsignor Higgins, who attended a religion-labor conference sponsored last year by the AFL-CIO and representatives of Protestant, Jewish and Catholic organizations.

Samson said that his committee has worked since 1978 to bridge the concerns of churches and labor. He noted that the committee has supported the UFW's boycott of California grapes, and has sponsored open forums on the U.S. bishops' 1986 pastoral letter, "Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy."

That pastoral reiterated the importance of unions in a just economic order, although it criticized some unions for contributing to racial and sexual discrimination.

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General

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