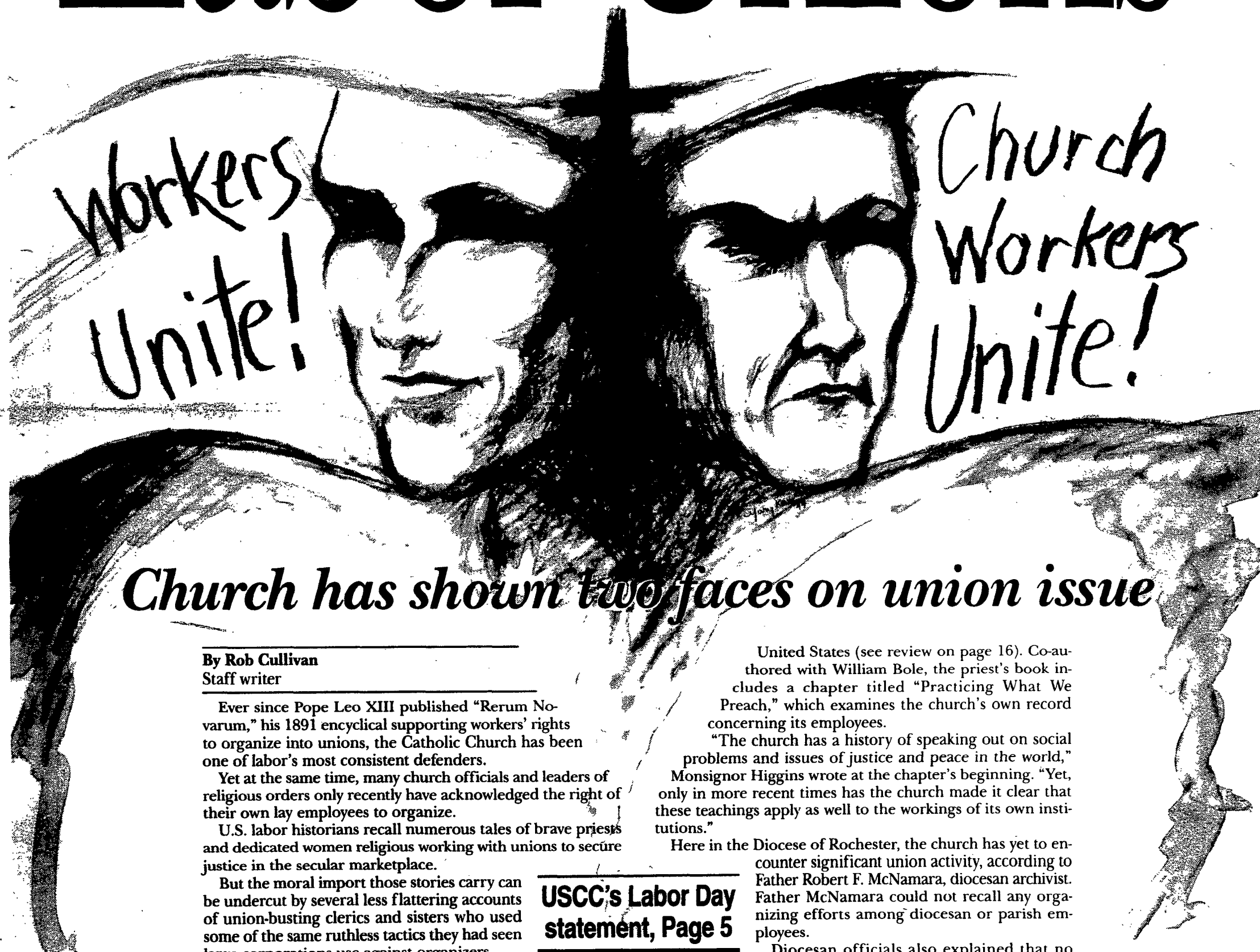


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Labor Unions



Church has shown two faces on union issue

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

Ever since Pope Leo XIII published "Rerum Novarum," his 1891 encyclical supporting workers' rights to organize into unions, the Catholic Church has been one of labor's most consistent defenders.

Yet at the same time, many church officials and leaders of religious orders only recently have acknowledged the right of their own lay employees to organize.

U.S. labor historians recall numerous tales of brave priests and dedicated women religious working with unions to secure justice in the secular marketplace.

But the moral import those stories carry can be undercut by several less flattering accounts of union-busting clerics and sisters who used some of the same ruthless tactics they had seen large corporations use against organizers.

And behind each cost-cutting church official deaf to the pleas of his or her workers have stood millions of lay Catholics who enjoy the benefits organized labor won them in their own workplaces but deny such benefits to church employees by skimping on parish, school and diocesan donations.

These are not the conclusions of some fanatical, anti-church critic blasting the church from its fringes, but the observations of the U.S. church's foremost expert on labor and religion: Monsignor George G. Higgins.

Retired director of the U.S. Catholic Conference's Social Action Department, Monsignor Higgins serves as chairman of the United Auto Workers' Public Review Board and the United Farm Workers' Martin Luther King Jr. Fund.

Last year, he published a book titled "Organized Labor and the Church — Reflections of a 'Labor Priest,'" chronicling the long and colorful relationship between church and labor in the

United States (see review on page 16). Co-authored with William Bole, the priest's book includes a chapter titled "Practicing What We Preach," which examines the church's own record concerning its employees.

"The church has a history of speaking out on social problems and issues of justice and peace in the world," Monsignor Higgins wrote at the chapter's beginning. "Yet, only in more recent times has the church made it clear that these teachings apply as well to the workings of its own institutions."

Here in the Diocese of Rochester, the church has yet to encounter significant union activity, according to Father Robert F. McNamara, diocesan archivist. Father McNamara could not recall any organizing efforts among diocesan or parish employees.

Diocesan officials also explained that no unions currently exist at any institutions under diocesan control, including its elementary schools.

Unions do exist, to a degree, at other church-related institutions that operate in the diocese but are not under its auspices.

For example, cemetery workers at Holy Sepulchre Cemetery in Rochester are unionized, as are nurses at St. Joseph's Hospital in Elmira.

And at Mercy Health and Rehabilitation Center in Auburn, a threatened strike by the Service Employees International Union was averted in August when the center and union negotiated a new contract for approximately 300 employees.

According to a diocesan spokesperson, in the neighboring Diocese of Buffalo, elementary-school teachers at 18 of 90 Catholic schools last spring voted to join the Diocesan Employee Teachers Association, a local unit of the National Association of Catholic School Teachers.

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