

Work 'still at the center of the social question'

WASHINGTON (CNS) — Here is the text of the U.S. bishops' 1994 Labor Day statement from Auxiliary Bishop John H. Ricard of Baltimore, chairman of the Committee on Domestic Policy. It is titled "Work: Still at the Center of the Social Question."

As we approach Labor Day 1994, our thoughts turn to the changing nature and meaning of work in our society. For more than a century work and workers have been at the center of Catholic teaching on "the social question." From "Rerum Novarum" to "Centesimus Annus," every pope over the last 100 years has stressed the dignity of work and the rights of workers. In our own country, our bishops have stood with working people from Cardinal Gibbons and the Knights of Labor through the "Program for Social Reconstruction" in 1919 to the economic pastoral of 1986 and more recent statements.

Some might say that the social question has moved beyond work, that this was an issue for a simpler time. Though the context has shifted dramatically, the dignity of work and the rights of workers are still at the center of a whole series of vital and complex questions of economic and social justice facing our society. On this Labor Day, it is worth raising some of these questions from the perspective of Catholic teaching on work. These reflections deliberately offer more questions than answers, more concerns than solutions in hopes they might contribute to a broader conversation about work in our land.

In our tradition, work is far more than doing a job or making a living. It is both a duty and a right. It is an expression and reflection of the dignity we have as persons. Pope John Paul II calls work the way in which humans collaborate with the Creator in the continuing work of creation. In the pastoral letter "Economic Justice for All," the U.S. bishops said, "Human work has a special dignity and is a key to achieving justice in society."

In fact, our faith calls believers to bring the values of the Scriptures and the teaching of the church into the marketplace and the world of work, acting as a leaven in economic life. The church's work for justice is not primarily carried out by parish committees or diocesan commissions, but by men and women who live their faith in their work, families and communities.

Further, our tradition insists we should measure economic policy especially by how it touches the poor and workers. So as we assess overall economic policy, trade policies, welfare and health care reform, our progress as a nation should be measured by how our policies enhance or undermine the dignity of the poor and workers.

Employers and Employees

Essential participants in the Catholic tradition on work are, of course, employers. Through their investment and management of resources, their economic progress or difficulty, their openness or resistance to workers' needs, they provide the setting where the dignity of work is enhanced or diminished, and where the rights of workers are respected or frustrated. In light of growing international competition, corporate downsizing or relocation, reducing benefits, part-time workers, privatization or permanent replacement of strikers, the relationship between employees and employers seems to be changing. The effect of these emerging

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U.S. bishops

and changing relationships needs to be measured against the ethical demands of human dignity and family life and its broad economic and social impact. Decisions about investment, the work force and relocation have human and community costs as well as economic ones.

Several pieces of social legislation now under consideration — health care, welfare reform, unemployment assistance — assume the existence of some kind of "social contract" between employers and employees. The expectation is that an employee who

works hard, follows the rules and increases the productivity of the company will receive an adequate family wage, other benefits and a job until paid retirement. The company, on the other hand, gets a skilled employee who is loyal, punctual, productive and who will use the training and skills developed on the job for the best interests of the company. Yet many observers see this social contract unraveling as ties between employer and employee come loose, with less sense of common task, less mutual loyalty and much more uncertainty and distrust. It may be time to revisit the economic pastoral and its call for new forms of partnerships and cooperation between those whose investment and management provide jobs and products and those whose daily work is the source of prosperity.

Workers and Unions

Our teaching also has consistently supported workers' rights to organize and participate in decisions that affect their livelihood. In "Centesimus Annus," Pope John Paul II strongly affirms the "right to establish professional associations" and "the church's defense and approval" of trade unions. "Economic Justice for All" calls for new partnerships between labor and management that could lead to less adversarial relations. However, the letter also points out that such partnerships are only possible when "both groups possess real freedom and power to influence decisions." We have seen the erosion of that balance when permanent replacements take the jobs of striking workers. Perhaps the Dunlop Commission, established to explore ways to strengthen the relationship between employers and employees, will provide a useful forum to discuss these issues. It's time for unions and employers to seek the common good instead of the single-minded pursuit of economic advantage.

Trade and Workers

Clearly our world is shrinking and our nation should welcome and face the demands of increased international trade and commerce. But the burdens and benefits of increasing international trade must be shared fairly. The rights of workers here and abroad cannot be ignored or neglected in the important search for new markets and new forms of global commerce. Our bishops' conference continues to urge that the key criterion for measuring trade agreements be whether they will help or hurt workers here and in other countries. The human consequences of international economic policy cannot be disregarded or marginalized. There must be ethical as well as economic criteria for trade. The economic pastoral pointed out: "Only a renewed commitment by all to the common good can deal creatively with the realities of interdependence and economic dislocations" in our economic life.

Workers and Health Care

Among the critical choices to be made in the health care debate is who will pay for health care and how much they will pay. At present, close to 90 percent of those who have insurance obtain it through their work with employee and employer splitting the cost. The result of this partnership and shared responsibility is affordable health care for the employee and a healthy and productive worker for the employer. In the debate about who pays for health care, some suggestions ignore this experience and ask each employee to take on the full responsibility of purchasing their own health care coverage. This could leave many individuals and families uninsured since they would no longer be able to afford costly health care premiums. Support for shared responsibility for health care is found as far back as 1919

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Bishops see an 'unraveling' in workplace

WASHINGTON (CNS) — Many see the social contract between workers and employers unraveling amid a changing relationship between employees and their bosses, said the U.S. Catholic Conference's 1994 Labor Day statement.

"The expectation is that an employee who works hard, follows the rules and increases the productivity of the company will receive an adequate family wage, other benefits and a job until paid retirement," said the statement by Auxiliary Bishop John H. Ricard of Baltimore, chairman of the USCC Committee on Domestic Policy.

"The company, on the other hand, gets a skilled employee who is loyal, punctual, productive and who will use the training and skills developed on the job for the best interests of the company," Bishop Ricard said.

"Yet many observers see this social

contract unraveling as ties between employer and employee come loose, with less sense of common task, less mutual loyalty and much more uncertainty and distrust."

Bishop Ricard suggested, "It may be time to revisit the (U.S. bishops' 1986) economic pastoral and its call for new forms of partnerships and cooperation between those whose investment and management provide jobs and products and those whose daily work is the source of prosperity."

The statement, "Work: Still at the Center of the Social Question," was dated September 1994 and released Aug. 25.

Bishop Ricard noted that "Economic Justice for All," the bishops' pastoral on the economy, calls for new labor-management partnerships that could lead to less adversarial relations. However, it says, such part-

nerships are only possible when "both groups possess real freedom and power to influence decisions."

"We have seen," Bishop Ricard said, "the erosion of the balance when permanent replacements take the jobs of striking workers."

"It's time for unions and employers to seek the common good instead of the single-minded pursuit of economic advantage."

Bishop Ricard pointed to papal support for employer-paid health care in the current debate over health care reform.

"In his encyclical 'On Human Work,' Pope John Paul II spoke about social benefits needed to ensure the life and health of workers and their families," Bishop Ricard said.

"He said that because of the 'expenses involved' in providing health care, it should be 'easily available for workers' at low cost or even no cost."

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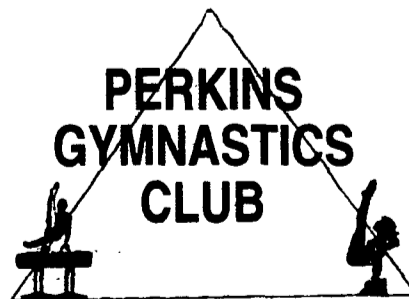
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