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Catholics, others revitalize coalition for workers' rights

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

Organizers of a coalition intended to reconstruct a bridge between Rochester religion and labor hope it will become part of wider span of such coalitions throughout the state seeking economic justice, according to labor organizer Denise Young.

"There's a historic and significant link between our two communities," said Young, an organizer for Local 1199 of the Service Employees International Union of the AFL-CIO.

"The Quakers use the term 'speaking to power,'" she continued. "I think that's a very important role for religious communities to play at this time. Many working people feel their lives are in crisis."

Members of organized labor and organized religion in Rochester are pooling their efforts to achieve such shared goals as worker safety, fair wages and benefits, she said. Between 12 and 15 Rochester-area representatives of organized labor and the Catholic, Protestant and Jewish communities have met five times this year, according to Young.



The local coalition is affiliated with similar efforts taking place in Buffalo, Syracuse, Albany, Binghamton and New York, she and other coalition members said.

Coalition members have already acted. They participated in a statewide 40-hour fast undertaken in March by about 3,000 religion and labor supporters who prayed for the common good of the state's citizens. The coalition hopes to undertake

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AFL-CIO head draws on faith

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

John Sweeney, president of the AFL-CIO, learned to love unions at an early age, as the son of Irish Catholic immigrants while he was growing up in the Bronx.

"I grew up in a home where my father was a bus driver and my mother was a domestic worker," Sweeney said during a phone interview with the *Catholic Courier* from his office in Washington, D.C.

"My father had a strong interest in his union," Sweeney continued. "I understood from my earliest days the value of being in a union."

That value, expressed in better working conditions and wages, was one Sweeney found shared by the Catholic Church. As a young labor activist in the late 1950s and early 60s, Sweeney taught in a Jesuit-run labor school in New York City, where the subjects included the church's many encyclicals and letters upholding the rights of organized labor.

He added that he was always inspired by the dedication of Catholic priests and brothers to the church's teaching that workers have a right to organize in unions to secure better conditions for themselves.

However, he noted that with the growing affluence of Catholics in the 1960s and subsequent decades, both Catholic lay people and the clergy lost some of their interest in the rights of labor.

"I guess you could see the changes in how the children of union members became successful in the business world and how they lost interest in the value of unions," Sweeney said.

Yet, the tide is turning once again, the AFL-CIO president commented. In particular, Sweeney said he saw a renewed interest by Catholic social activists in an alliance with labor to achieve social justice when he spoke at a convening of church social justice leaders in Washington in February.

"I really was so impressed with the work of these folks and the mission they carried out, and how they were interested in the principles and ideals that the labor movement believes in," he said.

Sweeney pointed out that church social justice advocates are realizing anew that the church's concern for economic justice reflects labor's concern for corporate responsibility.

For example, Sweeney pointed to the recent victory by a coalition of religion and labor activists here in the United States and in El Salvador over the Gap clothing store chain as an example of successful religion/la-

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