

# CONTINUED...

## Coalition

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more actions like the fast, Young commented.

Such actions are possible because most religions support the rights of workers, Young said. She noted in particular the Catholic Church's longstanding commitment to the right of workers to organize in free and independent trade unions.

Coalition member Tim McGowan, a parishioner at Corpus Christi Parish in Rochester, helped form a similar coalition in 1979 that lasted until the mid-1980s when he was serving the diocese as coordinator of public affairs for the now-defunct Office of Human Development. McGowan said he hoped that Rochester's churches could educate their congregations about each faith's support for workers' rights.

In particular, he pointed out that the Catholic Church has supported workers' rights adamantly since Pope Leo XIII published his 1891 encyclical on labor *Rerum Novarum*, and that the church has continued to support such rights under the current reign of Pope John Paul II, who has both issued encyclicals supporting labor and spoken out for workers on several occasions.

"Fundamentally (Catholic labor teaching is) about the rights of workers and the dignity of workers and people empowering themselves to ensure that basic conditions are met and that their rights are honored," McGowan said.

Sister Beth LeValley, SSJ, a member of the coalition, echoed several of Young's points. Sister LeValley explained that she was interested in building labor-religion alliances because of her work as vice president of Rochester's Progressive Neighborhood Federal Credit Union, which serves low-income residents, and as director of community development economics for the Greater Rochester Community of Churches, an ecumenical organization to which the diocese belongs.

"It just seems to me that in this society today, we have to work in partnerships to turn around economic disadvantages," she said.

A Rochester Labor-Religion Coalition subcommittee is working on a statement of principles to be published this fall, according to Isabel Morrison, a coalition member and social action coordinator for Downtown United Presbyterian Church.

Morrison said the principles should reflect the stated goals of the New York State Labor-Religion Coalition, with an added emphasis on the responsibilities of corporations to their workers and the communities in which they operate.

The statewide coalition has mapped

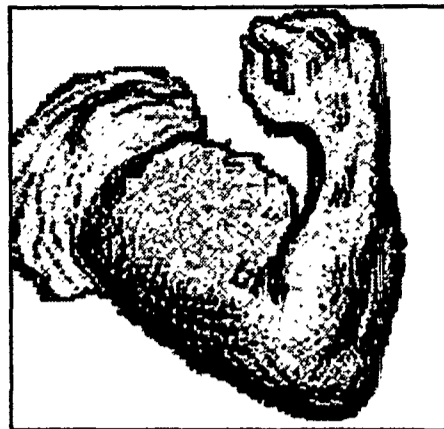
out goals for itself in order to "establish a just and healthy society for our families and our futures." The coalition wants to:

- Promote social and economic justice through sound public policy on issues of mutual concern to organized religion and labor.
- Meet the critical needs of the poor and oppressed.
- Prevent deterioration of essential public services.
- Protect and advocate for workers' rights.
- Prevent job dislocation, and advocate for job training.
- Lessen the impact of "extreme" political factions by encouraging wider community participation on issues; promote understanding and tolerance among different groups in society; and increase the level and quality of public dialogue.

The Catholic Church has lent its support to the state coalition through Bishop Howard J. Hubbard of the Albany diocese, who co-chairs the organization with Thomas Y. Hobart, Jr., president of New York State United Teachers.

The U.S. bishops themselves outlined their support for organized labor in their 1986 document "Economic Justice for All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy."

"The capital at the disposal of management is in part the product of the labor of those who have toiled in the company over the years, including currently



employed workers...," the bishops wrote. "Since even ... minimal rights are jeopardized without collective negotiation, industrial cooperation requires a strong role for labor unions in our changing economy."

Various forms of the state coalition have existed and met intermittently since 1981, according to Brian O'Shaughnessy, the coalition's state coordinator. Since about 1994, however, the coalition has made a concerted effort to drum up interest in labor-religion alliances because labor has suffered many setbacks in the social, political and economic realms in recent decades, he said.

"The coalition decided to activate itself or die out," O'Shaughnessy said during a phone interview with the *Catholic Courier* from his Albany office. "We said 'Let's not just have anything on paper.

Times are really getting too desperate for that."

According to O'Shaughnessy, his coalition stands square with the New York State Catholic Conference on some issues, including opposition to budget-cutting of social services that would hurt the working poor and families; a belief that the wealthiest citizens should be taxed at a higher rate than the poor and the middle class, since the wealthy can more easily carry the burden; and support for ongoing governmental monitoring of worker safety conditions.

In this era of growing uncertainty about the impact of the global economy on people, members of organized religion and organized labor can achieve goals together, according to O'Shaughnessy.

"I think where labor and religion come together most strongly is their priority of community over the rampant individualism of our society which I think can be very destructive," O'Shaughnessy said.

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EDITORS' NOTE: This article is the third in an occasional series marking the 10th anniversary of the U.S. bishops' letter *Economic Justice for All: A Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy*.

To learn more about the Rochester Labor-Religion Coalition, call Denise Young at 716/244-0830. To learn more about the state coalition, call Brian O'Shaughnessy at 518/459-5400.

## AFL-CIO head

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labor alliances. Since early 1995, activists had pressured the Gap to address human-rights abuses and labor-busting tactics at its Salvadoran plant, according to a report in *Update on the Americas*, a newsletter published by the Rochester Committee on Latin America.

After several demonstrations at Gap stores and a letter-writing campaign by religious and labor activists, the Gap agreed recently to make its contract manufacturing plant rehire union supporters — including pregnant women — who had been fired by the Salvadoran plant and to allow independent human-rights monitoring at all its Central American plants, *Update* reported.

"The Gap (victory) is a classic example of how the labor movement in the United States can work with religious activists in this country ... to raise the standard of living of workers," Sweeney noted.

The president added that by securing better conditions for foreign workers,

labor and religious activists also help U.S. workers who keep losing jobs to offshore labor that is generally cheaper and more easily exploitable than the U.S. work force.

He added that he welcomes the support of such church offices as the United States Catholic Conference, which has stated that it is behind a proposed increase in the minimum wage from \$4.25 to \$5.15 an hour.

"In our shelters and soup kitchens in our parishes and schools, we see working families who can't make ends meet because they work at minimum wage jobs," said Thomas Shalabarger, policy adviser in the U.S. Catholic Conference Department of Social Development and World Peace in a *Catholic News Service* report last month.

"For the Catholic bishops this is not a new or a difficult issue," Shalabarger said. "If it one of the basic principles regarding industrialized work, he said, that workers should be paid enough to meet the basic necessities."

Last year, in its quadrennial statement on "Political Responsibility," the USCC Administrative Board said: "The

most urgent priority for domestic economic policy is to create jobs with adequate pay and decent working conditions. The minimum wage must be raised to help workers and their families live decent lives."

Sweeney said such statements are music to the ears of labor activists. "I think that it's important for the Catholic Conference to take positions on these issues," he said. "I think that on issues such as this, politicians look to see what organizations like the Catholic Conference think."

Nonetheless, Sweeney said that Catholics in general need to be better educated on why their church publicly states its position on an economic issue like a minimum-wage increase. He lamented that a dearth of knowledge exists among Catholics about the church's view on labor and that only a few theologians, Catholic social and Catholic college activists and church members share Catholic teaching.

"The rich history of the labor movement is missing from the (Catholic) schools," he noted.

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