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Workers

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key to the whole social question."

"From its early Hebrew origins, Jubilee has focused on the importance and meaning of work..." Cardinal Mahony wrote in a recent press statement about Labor Day. "This Jubilee year is a good time to reflect on the progress and problems of the American economy and how it can serve all of God's children."

Living Wage

Although the United States is enjoying economic prosperity, the fruits of that prosperity are not being shared by all, according to religious and labor activists including Marvin Mich, director of social policy and research at Catholic Family Center of Rochester.

Mich is also co-chairman of the Rochester Labor-Religion Coalition, an umbrella group of religious and labor organizations. The coalition is affiliated with the New York State Labor-Religion Coalition, co-chaired by Bishop Howard J. Hubbard of Albany.

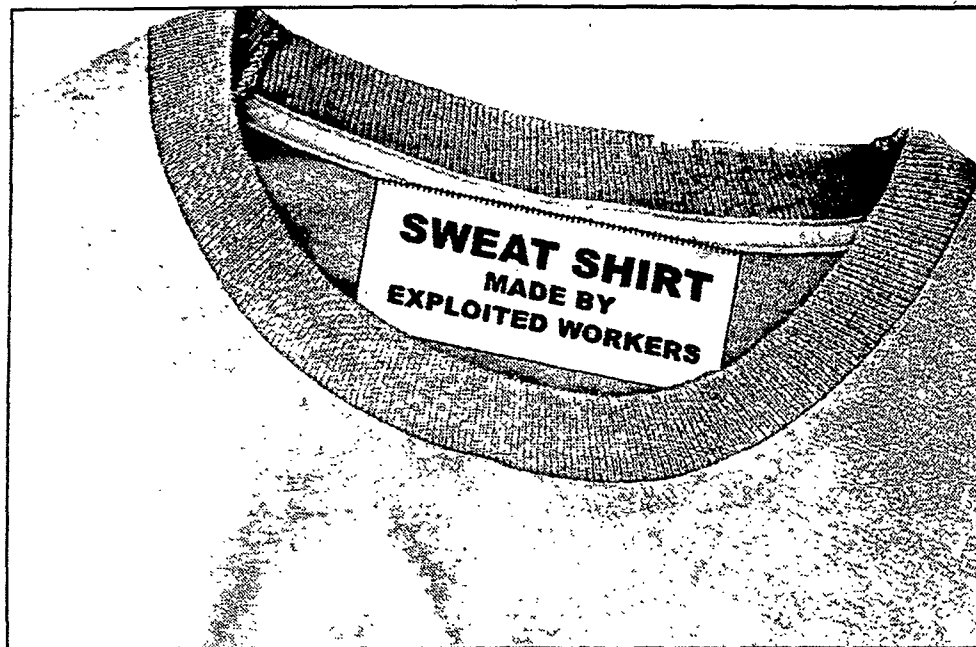
Mich and the coalition's coordinator, Gail Lynch, noted that they are currently lobbying the Rochester City Council to pass legislation that would mandate any company or agency that contracts with the city pay its employees a "living wage."

The concept of a living wage is deeply rooted in Catholic social justice tradition, Mich noted. As far back as 1891, Pope Leo XIII argued in the pro-labor encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, "On Capital and Labor," that a worker should "receive what is due to him, housed, clothed, and secured in his old age without hardship." The living wage may vary in size depending on the particular country, but such a wage is to have the same result for the worker to whom it is paid — a life free of want.

The city law the Rochester coalition is seeking would state that any company, firm or agency contracting with Rochester pay its workers at least \$8.52 an hour with health insurance benefits, or at least \$9.52 an hour without benefits. The law would cover employers with 10 or more employees, and with contracts of \$50,000 or more with the city. The idea behind the proposed law would be to ensure that an employee from a family of four made at least \$17,050 a year, the current federal government poverty line.

The law would affect both businesses and not-for-profit organizations, but it would exempt some youth employment and job training programs. Similar laws have been passed by at least 44 municipalities nationwide, and proposed living wage legislation is pending in 80 cities including Rochester, according to Mich and Lynch.

The two acknowledged that if church groups want businesses to pay a living wage, churches and church agencies



themselves must do the same. Carolyn Portanova, Catholic Family Center's president and chief executive officer, said of the center's 350 employees, 22 make less than \$8 an hour. The center is currently reviewing its budget to make adjustments that would ensure all of its employees eventually receive a living wage, she said, noting that CFC may seek to have a specific funding source to be able to raise its pay levels.

When asked whether the living wage law would unduly harm businesses and agencies that work with the city, Mich and Lynch noted that the proposed law is designed to affect larger businesses and agencies with long-term contracts, not small businesses.

They added that the movement is grounded in fairness because churches and church agencies are already picking up the costs incurred by society when low wages are paid. Low-paid workers tap into various church services through soup kitchens, clothing centers and other programs. Meanwhile, various government social service programs also must help carry the costs of providing for the working poor who don't make enough money to make ends meet, they said.

"It's the taxpayers who are subsidizing the workers in the long run," Mich said.

Mich and Lynch said the city council is slated to study the legislation in October, and may vote on it as early as November.

Mich and Lynch noted that the living wage movement asks two simple questions: "Why are we paying people less than they can live on? Can we morally justify encouraging a person to work full-time but at the same time pay them just at or below the poverty level?"

No Sweat

While fighting for a living wage in Rochester, the coalition has also joined a statewide campaign to end sweatshop labor and child labor throughout the world, particularly in the garment industry.

Mich and Lynch noted that in the next few weeks, the coalition will send out information to area public and nonpublic

schools about a campaign being waged by the New York State Labor-Religion Coalition to make schools "sweat-free." That is, schools are being asked to pledge that their uniforms and apparel with school logos be made only by manufacturers who abide by strict rules of conduct: living wages, safe workplace conditions, no forced labor or labor by persons under the ages of 15 (or 14 if that is the country's law), protection of women's rights, freedom of association and collective bargaining, the independent monitoring of factories and full disclosure of where a manufacturer's factories are located, included those to which a manufacturer subcontracts.

Already, at least two dioceses in the country, Albany and Chicago, have officially committed their schools to being "sweat-free." Timothy W. Dwyer, superintendent of schools for the Diocese of Rochester, said his office is not sure how many schools have agreed to become "sweat-free," but said he believed it was the majority. Diocesan schools received information on "sweat-free pledges" from the New York State Labor-Religion Coalition last spring.

tion last spring.

Workers' voices

Rochester isn't the only center of labor-religion action in the diocese. In June, 17 representatives from faith communities and unions met at Catholic Charities of the Southern Tier in Elmira to form the Southern-Tier Labor-Religion Coalition, according to Kathy Dubel, justice and peace director for CCST. Like the Rochester coalition, the Southern Tier coalition is affiliated with both the state coalition and the National Inter-Faith Committee for Worker Justice, which has funded the staffing of both the Rochester and Southern Tier coalitions.

Like the Rochester coalition, the Southern Tier coalition is also interested in the living wage movement and sweatshops and child labor, Dubel said. The Southern Tier coalition holds monthly meetings at Catholic Charities and has been working to provide labor speakers for Masses at various parishes in Chemung, Steuben, Schuyler, Allegany, Cattaraugus and Chautauque counties this Labor Day weekend. The speakers will offer brief reflections at services on the dignity of the human person and workers, Dubel said.

"We had many more requests than we had speakers, which is exciting," Dubel said.

When asked why the coalition seems to be drawing interest from church leaders, Dubel noted that pastoral staff at parishes want to know more about why people continue to seek material aid from the church in an era when prosperity is supposedly the lot of the nation.

"I think there's a growing awareness on behalf of pastoral staff on the realities of working people," she said. "I think our parishes know that something is amiss in the midst of this great economic boom."

For information on the Rochester Labor-Religion Coalition, call 716/262-7021. For information on the Southern Tier Labor-Religion Coalition, call 607/734-9784, ext. 135.

Seminarians organizing workers

FORT SMITH, Ark. (CNS) — Seminarians Antonio Nilson Camelo and Alan Jenkins came from Chicago to Fort Smith this summer on a special mission — to investigate how workers are treated in area poultry plants and to tell them how a union can help them.

Camelo, a Comboni Missionary from Brazil, is studying for his master's degree at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. Jenkins is a Presbyterian seminarian also studying in Chicago.

The two were part of an interfaith group of 25 seminarians who fanned out across the country this summer to help unionize workers as a way to bring justice to the workplace.

The 10-week project, called "Seminary Summer," was organized and sponsored by the National Interfaith Committee for Worker Justice and the AFL-CIO.

By the time they return to school this fall, Camelo and Jenkins hope they will have planted the seeds of organizing among the mostly Hispanic workers, who, they say, often work in hazardous conditions for low wages and limited benefits.

After a weeklong crash course in labor history and union issues in June, the committee dispersed seminarians like Camelo across the United States to work with labor organizers and help inform workers that a union can give them a voice.

"This is a new form of ministry," Camelo told the *Arkansas Catholic*, newspaper of the Little Rock Diocese.

"We believe that the churches should help to give workers a voice against injustice," he said. "I think the Catholic Church must be an advocate for the 20 percent to 40 percent of the workers who live below the poverty line even in this time of prosperity."

Said Jenkins, "Religious bodies should help organize workers so they can break the cycle of poverty. In some places sweat-

shops still exist and injustices continue."

Camelo said the people in Arkansas, traditionally a nonunion state, should "look at the whole picture of what unions accomplish." Jenkins added that people have a negative image of unions as being all about "politics, power abuse and money."

"Only the bad things seem to get in the press. It was the unions that put a stop to child labor," he said. "It was the unions that created the Saturday holiday and the 40-hour work week. Without unions, the disparity gap between executive and average workers would be worse than the current average: They make 243 times more salary."

When Camelo and Jenkins found that workers would not talk to them in the plants, they started visiting them in their homes, where they were less afraid to speak.

Camelo said, "A lot of people in the poultry industry have no voice because they do not speak English that well. At first they do not trust us, but we visit and gradually their stories come out."

The seminarians brought their message to several local churches and in early August met with a number of local clergy to discuss cooperation between churches and unions to improve workers' lives.

"When there's a union, pastors can do moral bargaining and apply lawful pressure to correct these violations of human rights," Jenkins commented. Workers need to hear support for unions from their pastors so they can "move beyond the fear," he added.

"Companies are so strong that they try to get the workers to say there are no problems, but they tell us about them in their living rooms."

Camelo said, "We need to follow God's will, to help the poor workers get a better life, like Jesus did when he ministered to the poorest of the poor."

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