

A Season of Catholic Social Teaching

St. Vincent de Paul Church, Baltimore

September 2020: Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers

There is something deeply human about the need to work. We get satisfaction from doing, from creating, from acting. It not only gives structure to our lives, for many it is their only source of meaning. For a church like ours here at which people without homes gather this understanding about the value of work should be obvious: too many 'eviscerated by the self-doubt borne of joblessness.'

As humans moved from hunter-gatherers, through agrarian to trades-based, and finally industrialized societies, workers became more and more removed from both the control and the fruit of their work. By 1891, the increasingly harsh working conditions and widening income gaps compelled Pope Leo XIII to speak out. His encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*, legitimated the social-welfare reform of industrial capitalism. Politically, he affirmed the principle of a limited regulatory state (because, he said echoing Aquinas, politics must be in service to the common good). Economically, he affirmed the correlated rights and responsibilities of both capital and labor (including a careful support of labor unions).

Rerum Novarum represented a dramatic change in the Church's stance vis-à-vis social developments and became the capstone of the Church's position well into the next century. Leo's successors would issue updating encyclicals on this encyclical's fortieth, seventieth, eightieth, and one-hundredth anniversaries. Subsequent popes offered various adjustments, expanding or contracting, but none shifted its basic design.

From Leo XIII through John Paul II these encyclicals have decried the tenuous position of workers when their dignity is ignored and their agency is compromised by their stark economic situation, when their choices are limited and their options few. As Scripture says: 'Behold, the wages you withheld from the workers who harvested your fields are crying aloud, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts'. (*James 5:4*).

In the early 20th century, labor organizations emerged in the United States and the situation of workers improved. But over the next 50 years, a combination of failed labor leadership in self-policing corruption in its ranks and a capitalist organized anti-union campaign turned public opinion against them. Pro-business politicians passed laws to make some states 'work-free,' effectively removing any influence labor could have over

local working conditions. And federal regulations have been rescinded at an alarming rate recently. Businesses fight labor organizing, our Catholic hospitals among them.

Catholic social teaching underscores the dignity of work and its importance in the fabric of our lives. From this commitment two types of justice emerge. *Distributive justice* demands that workers share in the profits their work produce. Stefano Zamagni, the President of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, has proposed the concept of *contributive justice* which is the responsibility each of us has to contribute to civil society and our collective well-being, matching a person's obligations with capabilities and role in society.

Distributive justice would require a just wage and management-labor contract negotiation. *Contributive justice* would require a more equitable society empowering people to contribute to the common good. This translates to ample public support of educational opportunities and workforce development, as well as the critical triad of housing, health care, and transportation.

One of the seven social sins, preached by Gandhi, is wealth without work. And lest we excuse ourselves, let's think of the complicity into which we have been sucked by managed retirement accounts collecting the easy profits of companies in which we have invested. Our country now is a groupthink of board-directed companies placing profit over workers; boards who worship the company's standing on the stock exchange. We cannot ignore this.

And equally important, where is our institutional Catholic voice – the voice that is to be not only informed by these social teachings but actually teaching them – when meat packers and migrant pickers have been declared essential workers and ordered to work in conditions demonstrably unsafe, with owners liability-free of any damage they incurred? These workers knew they were not essential, they were simply expendable.

No one is expendable in the peaceable world we are called to build.

Audrey Rogers