

## **ON CHURCH AND LABOR IN NEW JERSEY**

by Reverend Monsignor John J. Gilchrist

The history of the Catholic Church in the United States would not be complete without the story of its long and close relationship with the Labor Movement. Although at times this relationship has gone through periods of neglect or even disagreement on both sides, there continues to perdure a mutual commitment to the rights of working men and women and to the dignity of labor.

Monsignor John Gilchrist, whose personal dedication to and eloquent defense of these values has long been recognized here in New Jersey and elsewhere, has written a brief but thoughtful and challenging study of this area of the Church's life. As Vicar for Pastoral Services in the Archdiocese of Newark, he has been a leader in building modern bridges between the Church and the Labor Movement, very much in the line of the encyclicals of Pope John Paul II and the documents of the American Bishops.

I am proud of Monsignor Gilchrist's work and happy to see this study published. I am sure it will serve to focus attention on a major facet of the life of the Catholic Church in our country.

**Most Reverend Theodore E. Mc Carrick,  
Archbishop of Newark**

A Message From Labor The Trade Union Movement of New Jersey recognizes and remembers vividly its close relationship to the Roman Catholic Church in the early days of this century.

It was a logical connection for two reasons

First, the church and we the labor community were both in pursuit of the same goals and objectives. Our struggle was for justice in the work place. The search for justice had been articulated both in the Constitution of the American Federation of Labor and later by the Congress of Industrial Organizations. The specific ideals of these organizations coincided exactly with those spelled out in concrete terms by the church in "Rerum Novarum" and "Quadragesimo Anno". Church and labor forged a natural union.

Secondly, the labor community itself became permeated with huge numbers of immigrants from countries that were at least nominally catholic. Many of these new Americans became part of the very heart and soul of the labor movement.

We of the labor community are eager to renew our relationship with the church. In the words of the good book "Justice shalt thou pursue." Deuteronomy 16:20. We remain in the quest of justice for all.

We are happy that Msgr. Gilchrist has produced this little book. We of the trade Union Movement look forward to many more years of collaboration with the Church for the benefit of

the working men and women of our state, our country and the world itself.

**New Jersey State AFL-CIO  
NJ Building and Construction Council**

Prologue In 1991, the Holy Father Pope John Paul II, celebrated the 100th anniversary of the encyclical, "Rerum Novarum" (On the Condition of Labor) by producing his own letter to the world entitled, "Centesimus Annus" (100 Years).

Concomitant with the commemoration of Pope Leo XIII's enormously important statement on the rights and dignity of labor, many dioceses, universities, and other organizations including the labor community itself began to reexamine the church's relationship to the trade union movement. There were seminars, liturgical celebrations, and public forums dedicated to social issues that are of interest to both the church and the modern labor community.

Here in the Archdiocese of Newark, Archbishop Theodore E. McCarrick who has had longstanding and close ties to the Trade Union Movement, formed with the help of a small group of labor leaders, the Archdiocesan Labor Council.

These people were representatives of labor who could dialogue with the Archbishop and advise him in labor matters. They would work with the Archbishop to begin a new collaborative effort. Its aim would be to strengthen the bonds of justice that bind both church and labor in the common effort to ensure the dignity of every human being who earns his or her daily bread by the exercise of body and mind in productive labor.

The Archbishop's Labor Council, over the past year, has produced two very large, enthusiastic ecumenical Labor Day rallies in a show of solidarity between the church and the labor community. A day-long seminar at the Seminary of the Immaculate Conception brought over eighty labor leaders into a day of dialogue with the seminarians. That event was preceded by months of preparation by the labor committee, the seminary faculty, and the seminarians themselves.

The Archbishop has also taken an interest in labor problems. Over the past year he has supported the labor community in labor disputes where justice was an obvious issue. The Archbishop regards all of this as only a beginning.

But why? That is what the seminarians asked. "Why do we need this? What does the church have to do with labor? Is not the church becoming involved in an area that is controversial, that perhaps is more political than religious, and in a field that is more sociological than moral and ethical? Are there not more reasons to avoid the labor movement than to become involved - one might even say entangled in it?"

Herein lies the reason for this pamphlet. it will not answer all of the questions. it may not even satisfy those who oppose church involvement with the trade union movement. Hopefully, however, like the Archbishop's Labor Council, it will help to begin, once again, the dialogue between the church and labor.

## **The Church and Labor in New Jersey I. A MARRIAGE OF MUTUAL INTERESTS**

### **The Workplace**

Many of us who are older remember the New Jersey of our youth. In fact, most of us grew up in those teeming industrial cities of Jersey City, Bayonne, Newark, Paterson, Passaic, Perth Amboy, Trenton, Camden, and New Brunswick.

New Jersey was, at that time, a bustling, over-crowded, yet happy mix of immigrants from all over the world. Blue collar truly meant blue collars in those days. It meant lunch pails and time clocks. It meant factories and construction sites that were blazing hot in summer and frigidly cold in winter. Hard-handed men toiled at jobs that were often back-breaking and dangerous. The pay was low, the hours were long and the benefits very few.

But a man could go to work with his mind at peace. His wife was at home to take care of things like cooking, sewing, washing clothes, shopping, and, most of all, taking care of the kids. The home was probably a cold-water flat and crowded with humanity. But it was home. And usually, even if a man stepped out to the local bar on Saturday night, he could be found in church on Sunday.

Women too, had a hard road to travel in those days. Most women married early and raised many children with none of the labor saving devices of our day. Washing, cooking, sewing, and shopping in local markets or from push cart vendors was an exhausting full time job.

But many, many girls and women found themselves in crowded lofts and factories. They were overworked and underpaid, especially in the needle trades. Most were paid by the "piece" or unit of production. Females found themselves tending machines in dismal working conditions for endless hours and for six days a week. They were simply exploited.

### **The Church**

The church was there for the people in those days. The priests served the community. The nuns staffed schools, hospitals and orphanages. The church was an integral part of life. Dozens of national parishes served the immigrant population. The Mt. Carmel Guild and St. Vincent de Paul Society helped whenever a family was "down on its luck." St. Michael's, St. Francis, St. Mary's, St. Joseph's, or Alexian Brothers Hospital never asked questions about ability to pay. When a person was hurt or ill, they were there to tend and to heal. Life was simpler then.

The church was also busy in another area of the life of our people. Certain priests had studied the writings of Pope Leo XIII and had been taken by a new vision of the world of industry and labor. Previous to 1891, unions and labor movements had been under a cloud in the Catholic community. The suspicion of communism, or socialism, or even revolution, lay over the movement.

Now the Holy Father had said some amazing things. He had actually not only approved "Workingmen's Associations," but he had stated that the principle that "to enter into a society of this kind is a natural right of man." He had also stated that "the Bishops on their part bestow their ready good will and support to such associations. And with their approval and guidance many members of the clergy, both secular and regular, labor assiduously on behalf of the spiritual and mental interests of the members of associations."

Now, to be honest, Pope Leo XIII was thinking of "Catholic Workingmen's Associations" on a European model. These groups would, especially after World War 11, become a important political organizations.

But here in the United States, in this great bubbling cauldron of industry, the Pope's encyclical was a clarion call to action. The goals presented by the Holy Father of a just society wherein wages are enough to "support the wage-earner in reasonable and frugal comfort," and where the idea that people "should not be forced to work long hours that grind men down with excessive labor so as to stupefy their minds and wear out their bodies!" resonated in the crowded cities, mines, and industrial places of America.

The Holy Father said that a "man cannot give up his soul to servitude." It is also not right to place children in workshops and factories." Nor should women be placed in trades for which "they are not suited."

Finally, although the Holy Father spoke on many subjects, several small lines of scripture made consummate sense to the labor community. "Woe to him that is alone, for when he falleth, he hath none to lift him up." And this line had even more power, "A brother that is helped by his brother is like a strong city." It was clear that the Holy Father was stating that workingmen needed associations of mutual support and protection.

Here in our country, the Bishops took up the cry for social justice. In 1919, they issued a document called, "Program of Social Reconstruction." The Bishops stated, "The capitalist must get a new viewpoint. He needs to learn the long forgotten truth that wealth is stewardship, that profit-making is not the basic justification of business enterprise, and that there are such things as fair profits, fair interest and fair prices ... The laborer is a human being not merely an instrument of production. The laborers' right to a decent livelihood is the first moral charge upon industry."

When "Quadragesimo Anno" (On Reconstructing the Social Order) was issued by Pope Pius XI in 1931, he also placed his stamp of approval on unions. "These groupings, autonomous in character, are considered, if not essential to civil society, at least a natural accompaniment thereof."

By the 1930's, all over America, diocesan and religious priests were found to be associated with unions. Here in New Jersey, almost every major union had an annual Communion breakfast. Often a parish priest, or more often a religious, was the union chaplain.

This was natural because many of the union leaders had been formed and guided by "labor

priests." In fact, in the early part of the century, the first meetings places for some unions were in church schools and basements. The great Fr. John Ryan had started a whole movement of men who became famous in labor circles. (One can read about them in Msgr. George Higgins' wonderful book, "Organized Labor and the Church.")

Here in New Jersey, St. Peter's Labor School operated under the leadership of Fr. Phil Carey, S.J. Msgr. Aloysius Welsh began another school in Newark and also taught about labor and social justice in the seminary. Of course, by the 1940's and 1950's, unions were hardly new to the seminarians. Almost all of them had come from union families wherein father, mother, uncles or brothers belonged to the trade union movement.

Yes, the Church and the union movement were on one track. But what happened? When did the collaboration disappear?

**II A PARTING OF THE WAYS** In the years just before and just after World War II, the relationship of the Roman Catholic Church with the labor unions reached its peak. The unions in New Jersey were composed overwhelmingly of Catholics - Catholics who were primarily people from Europe, immigrants and the sons and daughters of immigrants.

The unions, moreover, knew well that the church was interested in them. More than that, they operated from principles that had come from the social agenda delineated by the utterances of the Popes of Rome and of the Bishops of the United States. They saw the priests as counselors, teachers and friends.

Of course, there were difficulties. Some unions were in a struggle to break free from the influence of communism. Others had begun to see the infiltration of organized crime. But all in all, the church and labor were supportive of each other.

What happened, then, to change all of this? The answers are sociological as well as ideological. Let us just mention a few of the factors that influenced the separation of the church from unionism.

**A. A Vast Demographic Change** After World War II, six million soldiers came home. G.I. loans became readily available. A huge housing boom began that literally produced suburbia. Huge tracts of land that had been farms and forest were cleared and split level homes were mass produced. Our population was on the move.

The church, throughout the late forties, the fifties, and into the sixties was in its own hyperactive building boom. She was following her population to the suburbs where she built churches, schools, rectories and convents. Her attention was diverted to the religious needs of these new communities.

Moreover, a new class of Catholic had come into being. The college-educated veteran and his college educated children were no longer "blue collar." Their work places were more likely to

be offices. They worked in managerial positions, in laboratories, schools, and a thousand other positions that required knowledge rather than physical skills. The Catholic component of the work force had moved up. Union concerns seemed very remote indeed.

Meanwhile, in the cities, the pastors watched helplessly as family after family moved away. Older folks began to go to Florida or to the shore area to retire where the taxes were low. Their places were taken by new people, most of them black, from the south. These were not Catholic. Increasingly our urban parishes found themselves in financial difficulty. Our Catholic schools remained filled - but with non-Catholics.

In the sixties, new waves of immigrants, Hispanic and Portuguese, came into the cities. They needed the church's attention.

In short, the church had her own problems.

The unions were far from her mind.

**B. Smokestack Industries Begin to Disappear** Every major city in New Jersey had been composed of those old, red brick factories that were surrounded by tenements and the homes of workers. One could walk to work, or take a short bus ride. He or she could carry a lunch pail and could be home for supper at six at night.

But now, the factories were old. They were built vertically with many stories. Companies needed to retool. They could build huge one-story buildings on cheap land in other states. So, throughout the fifties and sixties, factories in the cities closed. Aging plants were not renovated nor were they replaced with new industries. Construction in traditionally union areas was severely curtailed. The lay-offs began.

And there is no question that the corporations were looking for a cheaper labor force. They favored "right-to-work" states where wages were low and the labor force was docile. It is interesting to note how some companies are now in a second move offshore, and to countries where they can openly exploit the poverty of people in unbridled pursuit of profit.

As the factories left the cities, the black population immigrating from rural areas found decrepit housing, welfare, and no future. The reason was this. The source of income that had provided jobs for the European immigrants, that is the union protected manufacturing and construction sector, had largely fled. The Afro-American community was marooned in poverty.

And with the factories also went those unions that were centered in those factories. The unions grew weaker and weaker in the cities. In urban areas, the real power groups became political, ethnic, and local community organizations.

**C. The Unions Grow Up** Outside of the cities the trade union movement, especially the building trades, were still doing very well. While the manufacturing jobs were being lost, many other unions were a part of America's growth. They were busy constructing highways, housing

office complexes, and malls. All through the fifties, sixties and even into the seventies, these unions were generally powerful. Also those unions that represented people who worked for government found a voice. Policemen, firemen, municipal, county and state workers, teachers and other groups associated with government became better organized.

The unions themselves were now represented by men in business suits who had in tow an army of young lawyers. The leadership of the labor movement were professionals. They met their counterparts in industry and government as equals. They even belonged to the same recreational and social clubs. The voice of the church was no longer needed. Unions could stand alone.

#### **D. Civil Rights - a New Priority**

Among the social causes that occupied church people in the sixties were civil rights and the advancement of minority groups in American society.

Many of the unions, especially in building and construction, were traditionally populated by immigrants. These immigrant men and women had taken menial jobs and turned them into honorable professions. Laborers and trowel trades such as plastering, lathing, bricklaying, cement finishing are good examples. Plumbing, metalworking, electrical trades, and other skilled trades became very prized professions. Union members hoped, and had expected, to pass these jobs on to their children. This came directly into conflict with the new agenda for civil rights. New Immigrants and Afro-Americans wanted a piece of the action. This situation caused much tension. The church often found itself caught between new social action issues and her loyalty to labor.

#### **E. An Anti-union Sentiment in the Church**

In the 1960's, a little book circulated through the Catholic church. It was written by a certain Fr. John Coogan, S.J. and was entitled, "Rome and the American Labor Union."

This booklet was an all-out, total attack on American unions. It was written to defend "Right to Work" laws and was filled with distortions, and misinformation.

In that pamphlet, it was charged that:

- 1) American unions were never approved by Rome. Only "Catholic" trade unions ad the Pope's blessing;
- 2) Unions have no consciences;
- 3) Unions are hostile to management;
- 4) "Unions strike not so much for better wages, hours, and conditions, but simply

to express their deep hatred of the employer";

5) American newspapers use a "cops and robbers" approach to unionism where all the good guys are union officials and the bad guys are bosses;

6) The union is the worker's God. It has replaced the church;

7) The workers want "profit sharing" but it is useless because the unions have indoctrinated their members with a hateful adversarial attitude toward management;

8) The unions foster output limitations, featherbedding and foot-dragging that has raised the cost-of-living;

9) Higher wages for union members leave little profit for the investor;

10) "Negroes" are excluded from apprentice programs;

11) The public at large has come "to condone the sins and crimes of labor;

12) Many unions are dominated by racketeers and communists;

1. Unions practice compulsion, thievery, thuggery, skulduggery and sometimes skull-splitting tactics.

2. Certain unions are radical and a danger to faith and morals.

Fr. Coogan concludes with the motion that "our first task is to take the halo off of the unions." "Perhaps half the battle will be gained when the public gets over its starry-eyed view of the unions as necessarily altruistic forces for equality and progress - and sees them for what they are - often reactionary agencies of personal privilege."

Fortunately, this malicious little diatribe against unions never received wide circulation. But it did surface in a clear and succinct way, the problems that unions were having. A few bad labor leaders, a few unions controlled by the mob, and a few unions inspired by Marxist-Leninist principles had tainted the movement.

In today's language, the unions had a bad "P.R." (Public relations) problem. Today the media, television in particular, have only made the image of labor even worse.

We are able to say that, by the late 1970's, the unions and the church as a whole were on different wave lengths. Except for a few dedicated labor priests like Msgr. George Higgins and Fr. Ed Boyle of the Boston Catholic Labor Institute, the labor community had a very weak relationship as a movement with the Roman Catholic church

## WHY A NEW RELATIONSHIP? WHY NOW?

### I. THE UNION SIDE

There is agreement that, generally, unions have fallen on hard times. Their numbers, even with the above mentioned governmental employees included, have markedly declined. Unions which once comprised 25% of the work force now number less than 14%.

Even those unions that are directly or indirectly employed by governmental agencies (e.g., police, fire, associations of state, county and municipal workers, garbage collectors, teachers, etc) have been on the defensive. "Privatization" has become a trend. Privatization is the code word for the transfer of governmental agencies to private concerns. The garbage industry is the prime example. Even now, government is eyeing the possibility of transferring hospitals, prisons, and other facilities and services to private companies. Many of the private service corporations are non-union.

Since the 1980's, there has been a hostile environment around the unions. The PATCO strike involving the Air Traffic Control officers was a watershed. Granted, they were government employees. But when President Reagan replaced the strikers, management saw the opportunity to utilize the same tactics to destroy the unions. A little used decision of the Supreme Court in a 1938 ruling known as N.L.R.B. vs. Mackay Radio and Telegraph made the utilization of permanent replacement workers in a strike legal. This ruling effectively rendered the right to strike a useless gesture. To strike, under these conditions for most workers, means merely the right to quit their jobs. Collective bargaining becomes a meaningless enterprise.

Moreover, when strikebreakers are employed, it is now possible to hold a vote on the job in which only those working - the strikebreakers - can vote. Thus the union is decertified and the unions are broken and destroyed.

An entirely new attitude exists in some sectors of the world of business. it is a throwback to the unbridled capitalism of the last century. it involves the very nature of the corporate business world. As a place where an evolutionary process of the survival of the fittest rules supreme, it is truly a jungle.

### II. THE NEW REALITIES OF BUSINESS

#### NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL

During the 1980's, America was suddenly confronted with a whole new business climate. A worker no longer knew for whom he worked. Anonymous men with money and nerve were able to literally play monopoly with corporations. Leveraged buy-outs, junk bonds and corporate mergers played havoc with companies that had been part of the American scene for decades. Everything from airlines to department stores were at risk. Many companies were absorbed, their assets (especially the retirement funds) looted, and the rest of the company

carved up and sold off. Whereas, in 1938, a man knew who owned his company, and for whom he worked, and with whom he had to bargain, in the 1980's, chief executive officers came and went, and the real manipulators of business could be found in Zurich, or London, or Tokyo.

Further, in the pursuit of profit, mysterious power brokers can now send plants and factories to other countries where they are able to exploit a poverty-stricken labor force, and operate free of environmental controls.

Pure capitalism among some entrepreneurs can be translated as sheer, naked greed. The American worker could be the victim of so-called "global economy" unless the American people protect the American labor force. There is a distinct possibility that America will become like so much of the third world, split into two societies one very rich and the other quite poor. In fact, the huge national debt is a crucial indicator of such a possibility.

The unions, more than any other segment of the American economy, fully recognize the dangers that could lie ahead. They realize that if the unions are destroyed, then nothing can prevent a nineteenth century form of capitalism from invading the United States that we know now.

The unions, sensing their own need for allies, are ready once again to reach out to the one great agency which stood by them in the beginning. They look to the church and especially the Roman Catholic church to once again mount barricades in a fight for justice.

III. THE CHURCH In spite of the opposition of people like Fr. Coogan, the undeniable fact is that the Holy See and the American Bishops have never abandoned the labor movement.

Vatican Council II said in "Gaudium et Spes": "Among the personal rights of the human person must be counted the right of freely founding labor unions. These unions should be truly able to represent the workers and contribute to the proper arrangement of economic life. Another such right is that of taking part freely in the activity of these unions without the risk of reprisal." Fr. Higgins points out that the reprisal mentioned comes from government or employers.

In 1981, Pope John Paul II issued "Laborem Exercens" (On Human Work). In that document, the Holy Father spoke on a variety of topics. Looking back in history he reminds us that "industrial development emerged between capital and labor, that is to say, between the small but highly influential group of entrepreneurs, owners or holders of the means of production and the broader multitude of people who lacked these means and who shared in the process of production solely by their labor.

According to the Holy Father, "the conflict originated in the fact that workers put their powers at the disposal of the entrepreneurs, and these (entrepreneurs), following the principle of maximum profit tried to establish the lowest possible wages for the work done by the employees. In addition, there were other elements of exploitation connected with the lack of safety at work and of safeguards regarding the health and living conditions of the workers and

their families."

The Holy Father reconfirms "the priority of human labor over what, in the course of time, we have grown accustomed to calling 'capital'."

In "Laborem Exercens" Pope John Paul II reaffirms that the "position of rigid capitalism continues to remain unacceptable." And he warns in another place that "Highly industrial countries and even more the businesses that direct on a large scale the means of industrial production (the companies referred to as multinational or transnational) fix the highest possible prices for their products while, at the same time, trying to fix the lowest possible prices for raw materials or semi-manufactured goods."

He points out that, as a result the employer in a disadvantaged society "fixes working conditions below the objective requirements of the workers, especially if he himself wishes to obtain the highest possible profits from the business which he runs."

"The attainment of the workers' rights cannot be deemed to be merely the result of economic systems which, on a larger or smaller scale, are guided chiefly by the criterion of maximum profit."

Now what does all of this have to do with New Jersey? If we look around, we shall discover that vigilance is the price of freedom. Only a strong labor voice, combined with governmental oversight, can insure that the innate greed of human beings can be countered.

We must see labor as an indivisible component of the world economy. Labor itself must consider not only the workforce of the United States, but all of the working men and women of the world as part of its solidarity of and power.

Consider the Maquiladora plants all along the Mexican border. The workers are paid less than a dollar an hour. The Rio Grande and the land around the plants are horribly polluted. The shanty towns have no sewers, no running water, and are often no more than cardboard shacks. Consider the workers in Haiti making baseballs for practically no pay. See the sweatshops in Hong Kong or the Philippines. In communist China, they have reached the supreme in capitalistic greed. They use prisoners and pay them nothing.

There are American companies, American entrepreneurs, who are involved in these businesses. The leopard has not changed its spots. In business, very often, the bottom line is profit. Nothing else matters.

Therefore, the Holy Father, in "Laborem Exercens," clearly delineated the need and importance of unions. He stated that "the experience of history teaches that organizations of this type are an indispensable element of social life, especially in industrialized societies."

If the unions are broken in New Jersey and in the United States, the consequences for the nation could be devastating. Already, most families need a double income to survive. Wives as well as husbands must go to work to make ends meet. In America, it is almost better to be very

rich or very poor. If you are wealthy, the world is a beautiful place. If you are poor, there are all sorts of help - welfare, food stamps, and especially rent subsidy, and Medicaid. Middle class working persons in New Jersey, with or without spouse and children, have a tough row to hoe. Unfortunately, it may get even worse as a multinational economy takes over in an industrialized world.

The Bishops sense this problem. In their letter, "Economic justice for All," they bluntly stated. "The church fully supports the right of workers to form unions or other associations to secure their rights to fair wages and working conditions. ... Therefore, we firmly oppose efforts, such as those regrettably now seen in this country to break existing unions and to prevent workers from organizing. "

THE NEW DIALOGUE "Centesimus Annus," the encyclical commemorating the anniversary of the issuance of Pope Leo XIII's "Rerum Novarum," happily has now become the occasion to bring the Catholic church and labor into a new relationship.

May we suggest that the Roman Catholic church and the labor community are not now in a position to immediately fall into each other's arms and begin a collaborative effort on behalf of working men and women. Too much has happened. We have been separated for too long. Conditions have changed. We, both the church and the labor community, have changed, and in many ways, matured.

Labor leaders are intelligent, often college educated, and sophisticated. All of them are very "street smart." Each union has its own agenda and interests. Even though, in New Jersey, they generally fall under the leadership of the AFL-CIO, it does not mean that they always agree with each other, let alone with business and government.

The church has gone through, and is still enduring, difficulties in the wake of Vatican II, and the loss of priests and religious. Many of our new priests are themselves immigrants from Asia and other places. They have no understanding of the American Labor Movement. Many of our younger priests have no experience of the past, especially of the relationship of Church and Labor. We must begin anew.

We who are part of the church establishment and those who are in labor need to begin a "new dialogue." In a dialogue, both partners enter with no presuppositions. Each partner hears the other. Each partner lays out his viewpoint. In a dialogue, no one ever knows where the dialogue will go or what course it may take. It must be open, honest, and friendly. It is our suggestion that the Roman Catholic church in New Jersey and the labor community enter into this dialogue. For the sake of our people, let us see what we can do together.