

Shared Values Link Labor and Religion

When he was murdered in Memphis, Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. was helping black sanitation workers protest their abysmal pay and dangerous work. The black sanitation men went on strike after two black coworkers were crushed to death in a garbage compactor. The day before he was assassinated, Dr. King marched with black workers, many of whom wore signs that read: "I Am a Man."

Cesar Chavez was deeply grateful to the priests, pastors and rabbis who stood by him as he unionized farmworkers protesting poverty level wages and endless work days under the blazing sun.

Justice for workers surely must be in the DNA of religious faith. Sacred texts of Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists and Sikhs address the topic. The Israelites, with God as their champion, rebelled against their Egyptian enslavement. Those who champion dignity and fair treatment for workers will find that they embrace many of the same principles.

The ability of workers to organize to protect themselves from physical danger and financial ruin is a human right, a legal and moral imperative. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states, "Everyone has the right to form and to join trade unions for the protection of his interests."

In 1935, The National Labor Relations Act declared the United State's policy was "to encourage the practice and procedure of collective bargaining."

Unfortunately, workers and their unions have been under assault by those who view them as an obstacle to maximizing corporate short-term profits and to their economic agenda.

The major religions of the world and the American labor movement share many fundamental values. Religion and labor celebrate the worth of every individual and are committed to economic and social justice for all.

Virtually every major religion has policy or doctrine supporting the right of workers, specifically their right to organize and bargain collectively.

The National Council of Churches states its policy on labor unions as the “conviction that not only has labor a right to organize, but also that it is socially desirable that it do so because of the need for collective action in the maintenance of standards of living.

Jewish, Catholic and most other religions have similar policies. The Central Conference of Rabbis write, “Workers have an inalienable right to organize according to their own plan for their common good.”

Of course, there have been those who hold a different view.

George Baer, president of the Reading Railroad, said in 1902, “The rights of the laboring man will be protected and cared for, not by the labor agitator, but by the Christian men to whom God has given control of the property interests of the country.”

The concept of the dignity of work – and the worker – have long been the underpinning of churches and unions and both share the belief that workers can only fully realize that dignity when they have a real voice at work.

Perhaps the Business Roundtable’s recent statement that corporations have a duty to promote an economy that serves all Americans, not just shareholders, should be a hopeful sign at a time when income inequity is extreme and workers struggle to pay for life saving health care. Who better to guide and counsel

corporate leaders--who want to pay decent living wages in safe job sites and provide some job security for devoted workers—than spiritual leaders and people of faith?

Pope Francis, noting that Jesus was a carpenter, lamented companies that put more attention to profits than the dignity of labor. He said, “We do not get dignity from power or culture. We get dignity from work.” He recently said, “Labor unions that protect and defend the dignity of work and the rights of workers continue to have an essential role in society. There is no good society without a good union”

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