

Labor Unions and Communities of Faith

— Dave Bush

Dave Bush is one of the founders of CPFA. He has taught at Shasta College since 1994 and College of the Siskiyous since this year. He taught at Butte college from 1996-2001 and currently attends the Princeton Theological Seminary in New Jersey. – Ed.

After freeway flying for seven years I returned to graduate school. While researching the relationship between faith communities and labor unions, I was pleased to learn that many faith communities have official positions supporting workers' rights to organize, collectively bargain, and strike. Below are examples of some faith community's stands on these issues. Following this are suggestions on how to engage your church or synagogue on the need for "part timer" parity.

Many Jewish organizations have played an important role in securing improved working conditions in the United States. Morton Bahr, as president of both the CWA and the Jewish Labor Committee, wrote, "The history of the U.S. labor movement is very much a part of the history of Jewish life in this country." In 1993 the Central Conference of American Rabbis declared their continuing support for "the rights of employees to form unions for the purpose of engaging in collective bargaining and attaining fairness in the workplace. . . . We believe that permanent replacement of striking workers upsets the balance of power needed for collective bargaining, destroys the dignity of working people, and undermines the democratic values of this nation."

All the major United States Lutheran denominations are involved in worker justice. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America specifically supports the rights of workers to organize into collective bargaining units. In 1991 the ELCA passed a resolution committing itself "to protect the rights of workers, support the collective bargaining process and protect the right to strike."

Most Methodist denominations have acknowledged the importance of unions. The strongest statement comes from the United Methodist Church when it affirms the "right of public and private employees and employers to organize for collective bargaining into unions." Further, this denomination rejects the use of strikebreakers to replace workers involved in a labor dispute.

The Presbyterian Church (PC[USA]) has repeatedly affirmed the importance of seeking economic justice as part of a life of faith. In 1959 they resolved, "Management, as a governing force, should be called upon to manage fairly for all concerned." Twenty-one years later the PC(USA) declared, "In view of our theological understanding of economic and social justice we affirm for all persons the right to be paid adequately and treated with fairness and dignity. . . . [Therefore] we affirm the right of all workers . . . to join labor organizations and participate in collective bargaining."

For over a hundred years the Roman Catholic Church has taken an affirmative stand on collective bargaining. In 1891 Pope Leo XIII stated, "workers' associations should be protected by the state since they can be beneficial" for workers and the stability of society. Pope John Paul II, in 1981, called unions "an indispensable element of social life, especially in modern industrialized countries." The right to organize also requires the right to strike. Testifying before a state legislature on behalf of the U.S. Catholic Conference of Bishops in 1991, one bishop argued,

“When employers are allowed to offer permanent jobs to strikebreakers, strikers lose their jobs. . . If there’s no effective right to strike, what does it mean to have a right to organize?”

The United Church of Christ has taken a strong stand on social justice and workers rights. In 1997 they affirmed “the responsibility of workers to organize for collective bargaining with employers regarding wages, benefits, and working conditions.” Did you notice the wonderful, and profound, obligation in the above statement? The UCC does not claim it is a right, but a “responsibility,” to organize and collectively bargain!

Faith communities can be allies in achieving parity for “part time” faculty in the California community college system. Regrettably, most congregants and many clergy are uninformed about their faith community’s official position on worker justice; therefore, education is an important first step. Actions you might take include:

- Write an article for your church’s newsletter;
- Search your denomination’s website for bulletin inserts that highlight economic justice issues and have them distributed to your congregation;
- Offer to lead an adult or youth education class; and
- Convince your local congregation’s governing body to pass a resolution supporting equality for “part time” community college faculty.

When education is followed by action faith communities will become an additional partner in moving the governor, state legislature, the CCC Chancellor’s Office, and local community college boards to make “part timer” equality a reality.

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