

In Defense of Union Rights for Public Employees – Fr. Michael Seavey

Thanks and gratitude for all of you gathered here today and for the tens of millions of our sisters and brothers with us in spirit. Thanks and gratitude for the work you do daily in every type of job and every sector of profession. Thanks and gratitude for your work raising families and forming true communities. May God bless all of you with peace and joy!

The right for workers to organize and form labor unions has been supported and endorsed by Official Catholic teaching through the teaching office of the popes since 1891. In that year, Pope Leo XIII condemning working and living conditions fostered by the Industrial Revolution, called on Catholic bishops throughout the world to, “Support those who strive to unite working men of various grades into associations, help them with their advice and means, and enable them to obtain fitting and profitable employment.”

Over a century later, both Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI echoed that by teaching respectively, unions are “indispensable elements of social life, especially in modern industrialized societies”, and are needed now “even more than in the past, as a prompt and far-sighted response...”.

And the current Holy Father, Pope Francis says it as only Pope Francis does, “There is no good society without a good union, and there is no good union that is not reborn every day in the peripheries, that does not transform discarded stones of the economy into its cornerstones.”

In our nation’s history, there has been one institution and only one institution that has consistently advocated for, defended and promoted working people. That institution is not the government, it is not any political party, nor is it any think tank or corporation. The only institution that has consistently stood by working women and men at all times and under all circumstances are labor unions.

It is no coincidence that the fewer people organized in labor unions, the wider the income and wealth gap in our nation. It is no coincidence that the fewer people organized into labor unions, the more people there are lacking adequate health insurance. It is no coincidence that the fewer people organized into labor unions, there are more people working two and three jobs to make ends meet. This is not conducive to healthy family life or healthy human relationships or healthy sense of self-worth.

Anyone who believes labor unions have lived out their usefulness is living a fool’s dream. Anyone who believes they can stand alone against the forces of economic exploitation and financial greed has embraced the devil’s bargain.

Try standing alone before “efficiency” determinations downsize your office; leaving you on the outside looking in. Try standing alone before “economic emergencies” rob your pension funds while corporate executives receive salary increases and hefty bonuses. Try standing alone when a recent diagnosis on your family health plan coincides with a soon-to-be layoff targeting only you. You will soon find yourself discarded on the lonely heap of used and abused workers lost in a heartless wasteland.

There is a saying that anyone willing to trade liberty for security deserves neither. That needs to be extended to say “anyone willing to trade solidarity for individual freedom has neither.” That’s “the devil’s bargain”, and” the devil’s bargain” is the petitioner’s argument before the US Supreme Court this morning.

Only in true community do we discover our true identity and the meaning and purpose of our life. True communities are built upon and endure with love and justice. Separating individuals from supportive and protective true communities like unions is a recipe for divide and conquer, isolation and bitter loneliness, and

a corrosive anger lashing out at perceived scapegoats as the culprits for their own decline. True community transforms society from the inside out; especially from the heart and soul of every person discarded on the margins of society's abundance.

The dark forces of economic exploitation, condemned by Pope Leo in 1891 and consistently condemned by popes ever since still face us today. They are fueled by amassed wealth and power; and move against the forces of justice, true community, and true freedom. Their true identity, covered by a veneer of concern for liberty and individual rights, becomes readily apparent when the real agenda comes to the forefront.

The recent federal tax legislation signed into law made a media spectacle of throwing working people a bone. Meanwhile the meat was tossed to those already wealthy and the bill to pay for it all is passed on to everyone's grandchildren. That was a setback!

We are experiencing and will experience more setbacks because many decks are stacked against us. We will endure these setbacks because we walk with righteousness. No matter the setbacks, keep moving forward. No matter the hostility from a well-financed opposition, keep moving forward. And keep moving forward together.

Whether we win or lose in there today, truth is on our side and no amount of money can purchase truth. Truth always prevails, and truth motivates our just cause. Tell the truth about unions and let the people organize without obstacles to bargain collectively for the common good.

Jesus said, "I have come to set the earth on fire, and how I wish it were already blazing." Return to your homes and light the fires of solidarity across this nation. Go back home and form communities, true communities where everyone is welcomed and embraced. Go back home and welcome male and female, young and old, rich and poor, worker and supervisor, black, white, Latinx, API and all ethnicities; straight, the LGBTQ community and all orientations; liberal or conservative and all political persuasions, peoples of all faiths or of no faith at all.

Go back home, and form true communities with invitations to everyone who comes into your circles of life. Form true communities and let all who embrace the invitation take their rightful place. Make everyone welcomed and call forth everyone's gifts to make and shape a community that takes responsibility for the common good of all our people.

Give to all reason to hope. Hope is one of the most precious commodities in our world today. Hope will not die so long as we keep moving forward. Hope will not die so long as there are true communities for people to feel welcomed, safe and valued. Solidarity forever and God's blessings on you and all your loved ones. Thank you.