

Pope's Letter References Challenges In Workers' Ability to Form Trade Unions

In a June 29 letter to Roman Catholic bishops, Pope Benedict XVI discussed the challenges of a global economy, noting specifically the risks associated with workers' ability to form a union and bargain collectively.

"Through the combination of social and economic change, trade union organizations experience greater difficulty in carrying out their task of representing the interests of workers, partly because Governments, for reasons of economic utility, often limit the freedom or the negotiating capacity of labor unions," the pope wrote.

"Hence traditional networks of solidarity have more and more obstacles to overcome. The repeated calls issued within the Church's social doctrine, beginning with *Rerum Novarum*, for the promotion of workers' associations that can defend their rights must therefore be honored today even more than in the past, as a prompt and far-sighted response to the urgent need for new forms of cooperation at the international level, as well as the local level," he wrote.

AFL-CIO President John Sweeney called the "encyclical" letter a "much-needed reminder."

"To create an economy that works for everyone it is critical to protect workers' fundamental right to join together as a union and bargain for a better future," Sweeney said in a July 8 statement.

"As the Pope makes clear, it is not only working people, but also entire communities, nations even, that stand to benefit when workers exercise this right. In the document, the Pope reaffirms the Church's long-standing position that labor unions play a vital role in efforts to build a more just economy, one in which even the most marginalized workers are guaranteed basic dignity and respect."

Pope Cites Worker, Consumer Conflict

The pope also urged unions to think differently about the relationship between the perspective of the worker versus that of the consumer.

"Looking to wider concerns than the specific category of labour for which they were formed, union organizations are called to address some of the new questions arising in our society: I am thinking, for example, of the complex of issues that social scientists describe in terms of a conflict between worker and consumer," the pope wrote. "Without necessarily endorsing the thesis that the central focus on the worker has given way to a central focus on the consumer, this would still appear to constitute new ground for unions to explore creatively."

Additionally, the letter said that as unions continue to operate in a global context with new demands, they should "turn their attention to those outside their membership, and in particular to workers in developing countries where social rights are often violated."

EFCA, Letter Share Common Thread, CWF Says

Catholics for Working Families, a coalition of Catholic organizations formed to work for passage in the United States of the proposed Employee Free Choice Act (S. 560/ H.R. 1409), welcomed the pope's encyclical. The legislation, currently stalled in Congress, would, among other things, amend the National Labor Relations Act to require the National Labor Relations Board to certify a union as the representative of employees if a majority of employees signs valid union authorization cards.

The pope's letter contains a "bold critique of unregulated free market capitalism and reiterates unequivocally the Catholic Church's long-standing support for labor unions and the central role they play in ensuring workers' rights and just economic development," CWF said in a July 8 statement.

The legislation and the pope's encyclical-*Caritas Veritate*-"share a common recognition that workers have an inviolable right to organize, and that employers ought to treat their workers with dignity and respect," CWF said in a statement.

"The rise of globalization has coincided with a widening gap between wealth and poverty, and a steady decline in U.S. union membership. Pope Benedict's new encyclical reminds us that these sea-changes in the global economic order are not unrelated," Dr. Joseph Fahey, professor of religious studies at Manhattan College and chair of Catholic Scholars for Worker Justice, said in a July 8 statement. "In light of the pope's reaffirmation of the importance of labor unions, we ask our fellow Catholics, especially those in the business community, to join us now in calling for the passage of the EFCA."

By Alicia Biggs

The pope's encyclical letter may be accessed at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate_en.html.