

## **...and the Sheriff's Deputy asked "What business do you have on this picket line?"**

**Labor Day 2007**

**By: Fr. Sinclair Oubre, J.C.L.**

I have been involved with labor unions for more than twenty-five years. I began in the late 1970's, when I participated in Frontlash. This organization was sponsored by the AFL-CIO, and attempted to reach out to college students. Later, I attended union meetings with my brother. After ordination to the priesthood, I connected with our local Sabine Area Central Labor Council, became their chaplain, and attended my first AFL-CIO national convention in 1995. In the meantime, I became a member of the Seafarers International Union, and began sailing on their contracted vessels first as an ordinary seaman, and then as an able bodied mariner.

It may seem as quite a stretch for a Catholic priest to be so active with the labor community. However throughout the 1900's, many priests and religious were not satisfied with giving pastoral care and Gospel witness to the folks who entered the front door of their church. They brought that same pastoral care and Gospel witness to the union halls, picket lines, and contract negotiations.

If one is from Pittsburgh, the image of Msgr. Own Rice would immediately come to mind. If one lived in Chicago, Msgr. Jack Egan would come to mind, and if one was in California during the organizing of farmworkers in the 1970's, Msgr. George Higgins' picture would have been in many newspapers.

Finally, Karl Malden brought the idea of the labor priest to the silver screen in his portrayal of Fr. John Corriden, S.J. in the 1954 film *On the Waterfront*. In this black and white classic, Marlon Brando plays a struggling boxer who works as a longshoreman on the docks of New York. Fr. Corriden stands with the working men of his parish to end corruption and mafia influence.

But what business does a religious leader have in the secular arena of business, labor and the market place? He or she has a great deal of business there because people are there. With people comes sin, hurt, pain, and anger. There is also grace, redemption, creativity, abundance, and charity.

One only has to reflect on the scene in *You've Got Mail*, when Tom Hanks, who has just destroyed the neighborhood bookstore owned by Meg Ryan, says, "Its not personal, its only business." To the victor, it may just be business, but to the person who has lost their livelihood, a way of life and a tradition, it is deeply personal.

Then there is the classic "Greed" speech by Michael Douglas in *Wall Street*.

"I am not a destroyer of companies. I am a liberator of them! The point is, ladies and gentleman, that greed -- for lack of a better word -- is good. Greed is right.

Greed works. Greed clarifies, cuts through, and captures the essence of the evolutionary spirit. Greed, in all of its forms -- greed for life, for money, for love, knowledge -- has marked the upward surge of mankind. And greed -- you mark my words -- will not only save Teldar Paper, but that other malfunctioning corporation called the USA.”

For many, this speech became their *motus operandi* for their careers and work ethics. In the wake of this greed, the human carnage of destroyed careers, broken companies, stolen pensions, exported jobs, blighted communities and hopeless lives was washed up on the beach of society.

Without grace, and a view that work and human effort must build up the common good on earth, and work toward the Kingdom of God, we are only left with a Hobbesian world, where only the fastest, the shrewdest, most deceitful, and most amoral person can succeed. Wow, sounds like America's favorite t.v. show, *Survivor*.

Peter Maurin, co-founder with Dorothy Day of the Catholic Worker Movement, put it so succinctly and so truthfully, when he challenged everyone to work to build a society, community and world “where it is easier for people to be good.”

I find it sad that with so many people who can do so many things, that we can't seem to take care of the easy stuff. If we can find oil in the frozen tundra of Alaska, can't we figure out how the working poor can live in dignity? If we can write complicated trade agreements that protect the intellectual property rights of those who wrote the programs that I am using to type this article, can't we figure out a way to protect children from working in sweat shops, and being forced into prostitution? If we can clone human life, and patent people's genetic code, why can't we figure out ways that the working poor will not have their wages stolen?

What business does a priest like me have in business, labor and the market place? Well, if good people are not there proclaiming a Gospel of hope and working to build the Kingdom of God, then all that is left is the Gordon Gekkos, and their Gospel of greed. Peter Maurin is then turned on his head, and we will have a new world “where it is easier for people to be bad.”