



# The Missing Dimension of Work and Witness: A Passion for Workplace Justice

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**W**ork and witness, that is, the public articulation of the faith by Christians in the places and within the relationships where they make their living: What does that connection mean for Christians who are engaged in the occupations, jobs, professions, and tasks that constitute “work” within the technologically advanced but economically stratified societies of our time? How is that witness to find expression in a complex world of increasing diversity and often hostile relationships?

Responses to these questions will differ widely. This essay attempts to speak from the perspective of persons variously described as the working class, wage earners, blue-collar workers, or, in many cases, as the working poor. These are the men and women (and, unfortunately, too often, children) who produce the greater part of the goods and who provide the bulk of the services required by consumers within our market economy. This is their question for those who would speak about Christian witness within American workplaces: What do Christians say and what do they do about the many forms of injustice suffered by American workers? Unfortunately, one must admit that this dimension of witness is rarely acknowledged within the churches.

*The witness of Christians at work must demonstrate an effective concern for workplace justice. Hear the voices of several labor leaders on the possibility of labor-church cooperation toward that end.*

## THE CONTEXT OF THIS CONCERN

The rich man in his castle,  
The poor man at his gate,  
He [God] made them, high or lowly,  
And ordered their estate.

—William H. Munk<sup>1</sup>

For more than two centuries human society has been responding to the rapid changes inaugurated by the Industrial Revolution. Every aspect of our social existence has been affected by that historically unparalleled combination of labor, capital, natural resources, entrepreneurial initiative, scientific discovery, and class self-interest. In our own time rapid technological advances, international financial networks, an aggressive appropriation of natural resources, the exploitation of workers both here and abroad, and perceived national interest have contributed to the market system's economic and, all too frequently, political dominance in contemporary society.

Protagonists of the global market economy also have articulated the dominant modern ideology. These adherents of so-called "free enterprise" assert that the pursuit of profit, accompanied by little or no governmental restraint, will bring the greatest benefits to humanity. Claiming that this economic approach also fosters democratic societies, they frequently overlook or minimize the destructive social consequences of the unfettered working of the market. Without question, that ideology has captured the thinking and directs the actions of many economists, politicians, ordinary citizens, and Christians. Its negative consequences, however, are becoming increasingly apparent in terms of an unrestrained materialism, insensitivity to the common good, neglect of consumer safety, environmental degradation, exploitation of the poor, and restriction of workers' rights.

It cannot be denied that the rise of capitalism has led to the creation of vast wealth and contributed to the material and political transformation of traditional societies. Revolutionary modes of production were developed; new uses for raw materials were discovered; advanced forms of communication and transportation spanned the globe; financial networks were established that encouraged commercial exchange among nations; and formerly isolated peoples were brought into inescapable relation with each other. Over time, living standards have improved for many persons and especially for those in the most technologically advanced nations. Much that accompanied this radical economic and political reshaping of human life during the last two centuries has had positive results. Certainly few today would want to return to the preindustrial past.

Yet there is another side to the story of capitalism's triumphant march. The human cost of its success has been the immense human suffering imposed by the dominant forces of the emerging market society. Millions upon millions of work-

<sup>1</sup>This verse, omitted from most hymnals, is from Munk's nineteenth-century hymn "All Things Bright and Beautiful." I heard it while serving as pastor in an English steel town.

ing people, whose skills and labor made possible this historical “leap forward,” were brutally exploited by those who owned or controlled the capital resources. These men and women and children labored long hours in factories and foundries, mines and shipyards, fields and shops; they built the railroads and sewed the clothing, processed the food, and manufactured and sold the finished commodities. For far too long they received only subsistence wages, and the squalid conditions under which they were forced to live led to endemic disease and early death. They had few rights over against their employers, and their attempts to secure a measure of fairness in the workplace were ruthlessly suppressed. The industrial regions both of Europe and the United States contributed to this shameful story of callously imposed suffering on workers and their families. Our immigrant forebears, of course, knew that story better than do most of their descendants.

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That suffering hasn’t ended with the dawning of the twenty-first century. Many workers in the developing world experience these same tragic abuses. Our American society has its own versions of workplace injustice. Growing corporate profits are accompanied by continuing downward pressure on the wages and benefits workers receive. Whole communities are devastated by the greed-driven movement of industries to countries where workers receive minimal wages, have few rights, and are prevented from organizing unions. Major American retailers willingly take advantage of a situation that pauperizes workers both in this country and overseas. Immigrant families are among our most exploited working people. They and the other working poor are compelled to live on a subsistence level, and increasingly punitive legislation further reduces their access to proper nutrition, adequate health care, and affordable housing. Employer intimidation of employees seeking a voice at work through unionization has intensified in business and industry. That hostility to basic worker rights even extends to nonprofit organizations, including many related to the Lutheran church.

In sum, fundamental justice is denied to millions of American workers. That sobering fact cannot be ignored. Yet it has been—and continues to be—both in society and in the church. This is the social and economic context in which Christians work today. As noted in Munk’s hymn quoted above, too many are resigned to the inevitability and permanence of this blatant class discrimination. Some even attempt to provide religious justification for such gross unfairness. They are wrong. Christians who witness in the workplace today are called to articulate a more biblically informed, compassionate, and even confrontational expression of their faith. That means that the essential dimension of a passion for workplace justice must

find its place in their understanding, speech, and practice. It is the contention of this essay that this will be possible when Christians are willing to listen faithfully to their own biblical heritage and, at the same time, are ready to learn from the ongoing struggles of working people for justice in the American workplace.

#### THE CONTINUING STRUGGLE FOR WORKPLACE JUSTICE

The labor movement was the principal force that transformed misery and despair into hope and progress. Out of its bold struggles, economic and social reform gave birth to unemployment insurance, old age pensions, government relief for the destitute, and above all new wage levels that meant not mere survival, but a tolerable life. The captains of industry did not lead this transformation; they resisted it until they were overcome.

—Martin Luther King Jr.<sup>2</sup>

From the earliest days of the Industrial Revolution to the present, working men and women have fought for a fair share of the wealth their labor has created, for a voice in the decisions that affect their lives in the workplace, and for treatment by employers that acknowledges their dignity as human beings. In that struggle they have discovered the need to stand together as they contend for a more just, humane, and egalitarian society. Millions of workers have expressed loyalty to the stated goals of this great movement for economic justice: the right to organize themselves in unions, to be represented by those unions in negotiations with their employers, and to secure fair contracts that detail the conditions under which they will provide their labor to those who hire them.

Few Christians know much about the inspiring history of the labor movement in this country or elsewhere. It is a story that deserves to be told. It is a story of the countless little people—men, women, and children—whose courage and determination over many years have won a significant measure of economic justice despite the repressive power of industry, police, the military, and the government that often was deployed against them. These workers have made a difference in the lives of millions of our fellow citizens over many generations. The end of child labor (except where it emerges again today); the eight-hour working day (also under contemporary challenge); the end of “yellow dog” contracts (forbidding union membership); the end of “blackballing” (the refusal to hire workers sympathetic to unions); greater attention to workplace safety; overtime pay; the ongoing attempt to eliminate harassment on the basis of race, ethnicity, and gender; and grievance procedures that respect the dignity of workers: these are some of the achievements of unions in this country. They are no insignificant gains, particularly for those who have worked under the previous conditions.

Without the organized voice of workers it is unlikely that we would have our current laws protecting their rights. Economic justice requires political involve-

<sup>2</sup>From an address by King at the Illinois AFL-CIO convention, October 1965; quoted in the *Minneapolis Labor Review*, February 17, 2005.

ment, and working people and their allies are largely responsible for the achievement of rights now codified in labor law. Labor-management relations today are regulated under the provisions of the National Labor Relations Act of 1935 (the Wagner Act), the Labor Management Relations Act of 1947 (the Taft-Hartley Act), which was amended by the Labor-Management Reporting and Disclosure Act of 1959 (the Landrum-Griffin Act), and the Health Care Amendment of 1974. The intended effect of the Taft-Hartley and Landrum-Griffin Acts was to limit the ability of unions to organize workers. The National Labor Relations Board, also created in 1935, supervises union certification and decertification elections, hears and acts on unfair labor practices, conducts fact-finding, and can adjudicate claims and enforce its judgments in federal courts. Generally speaking, however, labor law today (including the NLRB, particularly under the present administration) provides inadequate protection for workers seeking to exercise their right to form unions.

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Most American unions belong to the voluntary association known as the American Federation of Labor–Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO). While not itself a union, the AFL-CIO represents a merger of more traditional craft unions and industry-wide unions, and is a powerful advocate for economic justice on their behalf. The high-water mark of union membership was reached in the mid-1960s when 37 percent of American workers were unionized. Today that number is 12.5 percent of the workforce. Part of this decline can be attributed to a falloff in union organizing, particularly among low-wage and unskilled workers. Corporations, often through their multinational associations, further weakened unions by the practice of “outsourcing,” the transfer of manufacturing operations and related services to nonunion and low-wage locations. The insidious practice of “union-busting,” through which consultants promised to keep industries and businesses “union-free” by legal (and, sometimes, illegal) means, was adopted even by church-related organizations. The consistent opposition of recent administrations to unions also has had a profoundly negative effect on the labor movement. For American workers—union and nonunion—this has come to mean a steady downward pressure on wages, benefits, and employment opportunities, and the corresponding destructive consequences for their families and communities. Some have described their situation as “a race to the bottom.” That description, unfortunately, is more than rhetoric for a growing number of workers.

Today the American labor movement is responding to the challenges posed by increasing corporate aggressiveness, governmental hostility, public unaware-

ness of worker justice issues, and the continuing decline in union membership. Major unions have taken the lead in launching vigorous organizing efforts, particularly among low-wage workers. The AFL-CIO is making more effective use of the media in presenting its views to the American public and in supporting political efforts on behalf of workplace justice. Internal debate and dissent within the labor movement give further evidence of a revived sense of purpose. Encouraging as well is the growing response of American religious communities to issues of workplace justice. The Chicago-based Interfaith Worker Justice organization relates to the activities of more than sixty local coalitions of religious representatives—Christian, Jewish, and Muslim—and union leaders throughout the country.

No organization, no movement—nor their leaders—is beyond criticism. We in the church know that from our own personal and institutional experience. The same is true of American unions. Having said that, we must acknowledge that there is no other agent in our society that so consistently, so persistently, and so successfully has spoken and fought for the basic human and democratic rights of American workers. If Christians intend to witness to their faith in the American workplace, they cannot ignore that dimension of justice which organized labor wants to represent. Further, they need to find ways to stand with workers in their advocacy of those human values that also are affirmed in the Christian ethical tradition. To do so, they need to listen and to learn about this missing dimension of their witness.

#### JUSTICE IN THE AMERICAN WORKPLACE TODAY

The question propounded centuries ago, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” is being answered by the labor movement and the social conscience it arouses. Yes, you are your brother’s keeper, and unless you help lighten his burden yours will be so much the heavier.

—Samuel Gompers<sup>3</sup>

How do representatives of labor describe the realities of workplace injustice that are known too well by large numbers of American working people today? The following questions were submitted to union organizers and officials. Their answers are summarized below and, where directly quoted, they are identified by their initials.<sup>4</sup>

(1) *What do you—and the American labor movement—identify as the most critical worker justice issues in our country today?* Workers seek freedom from employer intimidation and discrimination when they are attempting to form a union. All agreed on this point. A closely related concern was that American labor law, both in its enforcement and penalty phases (with respect to employer abuses), was

<sup>3</sup>Samuel Gompers, AFL founding president, in an address at Wilmington, Delaware, on January 27, 1916.

<sup>4</sup>The following union leaders, organizers, and activists have responded to the questions noted in this essay. Their direct quotes are indicated by their initials. I am grateful for their valuable assistance: Todd Anderson, Midwest field director, AFL-CIO; Philip C. Askvig, director of organizing, Lakes and Plains Regional Council of Carpenters and Joiners; Amy Bodner, political organizer, Service Employees International Union (SEIU), Minnesota State

weak and inadequate. Many cited the steady and unjustified downward pressure on wages and benefits, and the corresponding difficulty of workers to provide for the basic needs of their families. The growing number of people without adequate health care—as well as its increasing cost—was of particular concern. The increasing tendency of management to “outsource” jobs (to nonunion workers in this country and abroad), the push to privatize government-related employment, and the transfer of well-paying jobs to low-wage countries have contributed to the worsening situation of many American workers. Unions also protest “the exploitation and intimidation of recent immigrant workers by some employers in our country, and the lack of international fair-labor standards for workers in developing countries” (JY). Working people want “to be treated with respect and dignity instead of being managed by threats, fear, and the intimidation of job loss” (WK). Too many workers are “treated as mere commodities in the drive toward greater and greater profit” (BK).

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(2) *What steps is the American labor movement taking to address these issues?* A number of unions have increased their organizing efforts, particularly among low-wage workers. The American labor movement has lobbied for the right-to-organize legislation known as the Employee Free Choice Act, although prospects for this and other labor law reform under the present administration are not favorable. Efforts have been made to educate the general public about the value of unions. At the same time, unions are putting a stronger emphasis on the education of their own members. Emerging coalitions of labor, community organizations, and religious groups have argued for local “living wage” ordinances, cooperated in exposing workplace abuses, and advocated for the rights of low-wage workers. Unions are beginning to recognize and adapt to the changing demographics of the American workforce, taking into account the growing number of women, people of color, immigrants, migrants, and senior citizens in the workforce. More than

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Council; Jennifer Christensen, secretary-treasurer, United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), Local 789; Julia Dreier, organizer, Service Employees International Union (SEIU), Local 113; Martin Goff, director of organizing, UNITE HERE (garment workers and hotel and restaurant employees), Local 17; Bernard Hess, organizer, United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), Local 789; Kate Kline, lead organizer, Minnesota Nurses Association; William Klinsing, business representative, Service Employees International Union (SEIU), Local 22; Shar Knutson, president, Saint Paul AFL-CIO Trades and Labor Assembly; Barbara Kucera, editor, *Workday Minnesota* website, a collaboration of the Labor Education Service of the University of Minnesota and the Minnesota AFL-CIO; Michael Kuchta, editor, *The Union Advocate*, official monthly newspaper of the Saint Paul AFL-CIO Trades and Labor Assembly, Communication Workers of America (CWA), Local 37002; Bill Moore, chief of staff, Minnesota AFL-CIO, American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), Local 737; Ray Waldron, president, Minnesota AFL-CIO; Bruce Yernberg, business representative, International Union of Operating Engineers (IUOP), Local 70; Jon Youngdahl, executive director, Service Employees International Union (SEIU), Minnesota State Council.

ever, “the American labor movement will need to partner with churches, nonprofits, business, and other key constituencies to address critical issues like rising health care costs, the loss of manufacturing and industrial jobs, and cuts in critical community services” (JY).

(3) *What are the major obstacles to the achievement of greater workplace justice in this country?* Not surprisingly, one is the self-centeredness of a society that has lost its sense of shared responsibility. “People who don’t live as part of a community, or do not see the workplace as an appropriate setting for their vision of community, will not even think about those who are less fortunate, let alone act in a meaningful way” (MK). Most respondents found fault with the single-minded drive for corporate profits that leads to the weakened application of labor laws, lower wages and benefits, the frequent dismantling of safety laws and standards, media misrepresentation of unions, and the political dominance of business interests to the exclusion of important interests of the broader society. Several pointed to the lack of leadership as a central issue. This criticism applies to political parties, the institutional labor movement, and religious communities that have failed to make real workplace justice a priority on the local, state, and national levels.

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(4) *What do the social visions of the labor movement and the churches have in common that should lead us to work together?* There is an appreciation for what Christians can bring to the struggle for economic justice in this society. “As a Christian, I see the gospel of Jesus Christ infused in the goals of labor unions: recognition of the worth and dignity of even the least among us; the sharing, rather than the hoarding, of abundance; the common good over individual excess; opposition to exploitation of the outcasts of society; respect for the gifts in each one of us, for the contributions each one of us makes, even if the marketplace does not value those gifts; the ability to change lives and, ultimately, society” (MK). Another offers this reminder: “What we share in common are the workers, and the belief that they have a right to be fairly compensated for their labor, that they have a right to be treated with dignity and respect by their employers, and that their employers will be just and fair in the treatment of all workers” (JC). Both the churches and the labor movement recognize the dignity of human work and the need for social justice if we are to live together as a community. “There is a shared commitment to advocate for people who have the least amount of power—low-wage workers, victims of discrimination in the workplace, and people who work in occupations with high injury rates, to name a few. As Christians, we are called into public service on behalf of our sisters and brothers who are in need of workplace representation and justice. ‘Happy are those who are merciful to others; God will be merciful to them’”(JY).



(5) *Concretely, how can the churches cooperate with unions in the struggle for a greater measure of workplace justice?* “Talk to each other more. Learn about each other. Break through the stereotypes. Realize our commonalities” (SK). The churches are urged to teach pastors and members about issues of worker justice in seminaries and in congregational settings. Christians need to learn to relate economic justice concerns to the teachings of the Bible. Laypersons can be encouraged to get involved in specific struggles for worker justice in their own places of work and communities. “Churches need to take the lead on workplace justice where they have most influence—in the hospitals, nursing homes, social service agencies, educational institutions, and other places that are either owned or affiliated with denominations or individual congregations” (JY). Churches also need to be responsible employers, respecting their employees’ right to unionize if they so decide. “When there is a basis of understanding, opportunities to stand with people at the picket line or in the political arena will be seen not just as helping out someone else but helping out the whole community” (KK). “Unions need to partner with churches not just when we have an immediate need to ask for help on workplace justice issues, but on an ongoing basis around all issues of social justice, e.g., the health care crisis, homelessness, hunger and poverty, and other local and global social justice concerns” (JY).

#### CHRISTIAN WITNESS AND THE PRACTICE OF WORKPLACE JUSTICE

[Christians] live solely by hope and therefore by the promise that human right, worth, freedom, peace, and joy are not a chimera but have already been actualized by God in Jesus Christ and will finally and ultimately be revealed in their actualization. They have to be witnesses, shining lights of hope, to all [people]. They have to make the promise known to them in its direct wording and sense as a call to faith....But Christians cannot be content with this. This call needs a practical commentary in the acts of those who issue it to [human beings]—just as Jesus Christ himself proclaimed the kingdom of God not only with words but also with signficatory acts.

—Karl Barth<sup>5</sup>

In what ways can a Christian commitment to workplace justice be a “practical commentary” on the faith that we would commend to others during our daily work? Can efforts in support of the struggle for worker justice—however limited and inadequate—also be understood as “signficatory acts,” pointing to the final kingdom of righteousness promised in Jesus Christ? For Karl Barth, the preeminent theologian of the twentieth century, they were an integral part of Christian witness. During his twelve-year ministry in a Swiss industrial town, Barth helped to form a local trade union, reached out to workers alienated from the church, and publicly opposed the powerful business interests that attempted to silence him and

<sup>5</sup>Karl Barth, *The Christian Life: Church Dogmatics IV, 4: Lecture Fragments*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981) 270.

exploit the workers of his community. Issues of economic justice continued to concern him throughout his distinguished career as a theologian of the church.

What then of our work and our witness? There is an inescapable connection between confessing the faith with integrity and, at the same time, opposing the injustice endured by many of our neighbors in the workplace. Witnessing to the Lord of all life, Jesus Christ, necessarily incorporates a passion for justice in the workplace. Here is how it may come to daily and practical expression:

- acknowledgement of our past failures to understand the concerns or come to the aid of the men and women and children who suffer injustice in the workplace
- openness to learn from our brothers and sisters in the American labor movement so that we may come to a better understanding of fundamental issues of workplace justice today
- renewed appropriation by congregations and individuals of the biblical vision, the theological convictions, and ethical imperatives that compel us to stand with the victims of economic injustice
- readiness to confront abuses of workers' rights in the broader society, in our own communities, in our own places of work, and in church-related institutions
- opposition to every attempt by employers to prevent workers from exercising their right to organize as a union and to engage in good-faith collective bargaining
- particular sensitivity to the desperate situations of migrants, immigrants, and other low-wage workers, and the courage to stand with them when they are exploited and marginalized by persons and institutions within this society
- encouragement of political action leading to legislation that will strengthen existing labor law, protect workers on the job, and provide an adequate "safety net" for those lacking proper nutrition, housing, medical care, and job training
- possibly joining with union members and representatives of other religious bodies for the purpose of securing a greater measure of fairness in local workplaces; in Minnesota this has already occurred in the Twin Cities and Duluth
- better informed and more consistent advocacy by synodical and church-wide ecclesiastical leaders on behalf of workers' rights and in opposition to antiunion practices within our social ministry organizations and other church institutions.

The time is late, but let us begin. Of this we can be confident: the Christ to whom we would witness in all of life will give us courage to speak and act in his

name in the places and relationships that constitute our daily work. Let it be our prayer that our efforts may serve as faithful witness to that final gift of grace, the kingdom in which humanity will find its true home and just and lasting community. ⊕

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