

~~United States Catholic Conference~~  
~~Higgins 1972~~ Labor Day Statement  
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# LABOR DAY STATEMENT

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On Europe's Labor Day, May 1, Pope Paul VI reminded workingmen that Christ did manual labor and was known to all as the foster son of a carpenter. The Pope stressed the Church's concern for the condition of working people at a general audience attended by several thousand of their number. The Church, he said, has the greatest sympathy for the workingman precisely because "it sees in him and proclaims for him the dignity of man, the brother who is equal to every other man, the inviolable person upon whose face is impressed a divine likeness."

Pope Paul's concern for the dignity of manual labor is a familiar theme in Christian social teaching, but it bears repeating in season and out of season. Though it has been voiced in similar terms by previous Popes and by countless theologians and other experts steeped in the Christian tradition, it takes on new meaning and new implications and must be applied in different ways in each succeeding generation, including our own.

It would be wide of the mark, in other words, to assume that because of our phenomenal progress in the field of technology and the rapid, but very uneven, improvement in our standard of living, there is no longer any need to be concerned about the dignity of labor in general and of manual labor in particular. To the contrary, there is mounting evidence on every side that technological progress—even in this the wealthiest nation in the history of the world—has created almost as many problems for a large segment of the working force as it has thus far managed to solve. Of the many unsolved economic and social problems in this area, one in particular—the sheer boredom and the meaninglessness of so many of today's dead-end occupations and the low esteem in which society seems to hold these

occupations—is, by all odds, the most critical so far as the workers themselves are concerned.

Even in the very recent past it was commonly thought that, while there were still many inequities in our economic system, nevertheless the average unskilled or semi-skilled workingman—particularly if he happened to enjoy the protection of a union contract—was reasonably well satisfied with his lot and, whatever his minor grievances, was content to work within the system. As one writer put it in a recent study on the nature of work in our society, “the class of men who actually work with their hands, the working class, has obtained much of that social consideration for which it had often fought with such intense bitterness, and in most countries workers are incessantly extolled in the rhetoric of all political parties.”

This description of the average worker's status, though it might have been plausible enough when it was first published just a few years ago, must sound rather hollow to millions of unskilled or semi-skilled American workers—white, Black and Brown—in the year 1972. It runs directly counter to what many workers themselves are currently saying about the boredom and the deadly routine of their occupations, the frustration which they experience in their daily working lives and, above all, their feeling that they have been trapped in a kind of vicious circle and are not being accorded the status and the degree of recognition to which they feel they are entitled and which their contribution to society fully merits. During the past few years, this uneasy feeling on the part of so many workers that they are the “forgotten people” of America has caught the attention of the media and has found dramatic expression in a spate of books, articles, and television documentaries. In summary, what aggrieved working people—many, of course, are not so aggrieved—have been telling the media, not only in sorrow but in anger, is that while they need higher wages and will demand a fairer distribution of the national income, they want, more than anything else, to find a sense of meaning in the work that they are required to do and want to be recognized by society as men of dignity and worth. As one semi-skilled laborer put it in a recent interview: “You can't take pride any more. . . . Picasso can point to a painting. I think I've worked harder than Picasso and

what can I point to? A writer can point to a book. Everybody should have something to point to.”

Another frustrated worker put it this way. “What all of us are looking for is a calling, not just a job. Most of us, like the assembly line workers, have jobs that are too small for our spirit. Jobs are just not big enough for people.”

These plaintive appeals by two anonymous workingmen for a greater sense of meaning and of purpose in their working lives are typical of what many of their fellow workers have said to the media in other interviews and what millions of additional workers would undoubtedly say if they were given the opportunity to speak. The aggrieved worker’s “essential frustration,” as one sociologist has put it, is “the utter stagnancy of his status. Wages may continue to increase, but his opportunities for advancement—even the ability to move over instead of up or out, are practically nil. He feels that society does not value his work. It is as if he had been betrayed by the very system he so passionately defends. At best, the semi-skilled workingman has been taken for granted and forgotten, but more often he has been socially degraded.”

To make matters worse, all of the evidence seems to indicate that it is the under-30 workers who are the most discontented with the monotony of their semi-skilled jobs, the most disenchanted with the system as a whole, and the most willing to do something—almost anything—to give vent to their sense of hopelessness and frustration. To be sure, the sense of frustration experienced by so many younger workers and their feeling of having been trapped in a vicious circle may have as much to do with the so-called generation gap and all that that implies as it does with the system itself. Whatever its causes, however, it presents management and organized labor with one of the major challenges of the seventies. In the short run, this problem affects management more directly and more immediately than it affects the labor movement, the reason being that high absenteeism and turn-over and worker indifference mean higher costs, less efficiency and poorer production quality.

In the longer view of things, however, the problem of job dissatisfaction and rampant absenteeism may prove to be an even greater challenge to organized labor than it is to management. Indeed

there are those who contend that the problems surrounding the whole question of work are perhaps the most difficult of all the dilemmas faced by the American labor movement at the present time. "Today . . .," one team of writers has pointed out, "in the midst of a cultural revolution that has touched every part of American life, the idea of spending a lifetime working, eating, resting, and moving at the commands of a machine or a superior looks something like slavery: even if the wages are good, the *life* is not. And when we add to this the fact that a man who seeks to leave his job may have to wait twenty or thirty years before having the right to any part of his pension, the life of even a well-paid skilled worker looks like something close to indentured servitude."

This is admittedly strong language—perhaps a little too strong—but labor and management would be well advised to take it very seriously. And not only labor and management—but the American people as a whole. As a prominent member of the United States Congress recently pointed out in a round-up statement on the deep and bitter feelings that divide our people, "the blame is there for all to share. . . . Here, as in so many other areas, we have to point the finger of blame clearly toward ourselves. We have to recognize how often the workingman has been failed by his government . . . , failed by his employer, failed by his union, failed by his country. It does not have to be that way."

Making work more human and more humane and making it possible for unskilled or semi-skilled workers to live not as machines but as men and women of dignity and worth will not be easily accomplished, but it goes to the heart of what we mean by social justice. As Pope Paul VI noted in his Mayday message, it also goes to the heart of the Gospel message concerning the dignity of manual labor. The Christian theology of work, which derives from this Gospel message, starts from the premise that people work—or should work—not merely to earn a living, not merely to develop their own personal growth, nor merely to serve the needs of their fellowmen, but also and more profoundly because by means of their labor they become partners in the work of bringing God's creation to perfection.

The Second Vatican Council's Pastoral Constitu-

tion on the Church in the Modern World develops this theme as follows:

Human labor which is expended in the production and exchange of goods or in the performance of economic services is superior to the other elements of economic life. For the latter have only the nature of tools.

Whether it is engaged in independently or paid for by someone else, this labor comes immediately from the person. In a sense, the person stamps the things of nature with his seal and subdues them to his will. It is ordinarily by his labor that a man supports himself and his family, is joined to his fellow men and serves them, and is bringing God's creation to perfection. Indeed, we hold that by offering his labor to God a man becomes associated with the redemptive work itself of Jesus Christ, who conferred an eminent dignity on labor when at Nazareth He worked with His own hands.

In quoting this passage from one of the major Council documents, we are not suggesting, nor were the Council Fathers themselves naive enough to suppose, that the average person normally conceives of his daily work in such highly theological terms. On the other hand, it is fair to say that most men of faith at least vaguely sense that this is the only satisfying answer to the question as to why they should work at all.

An exception must be made, however, in the case of those people referred to above who feel that they are hopelessly trapped in occupations (white collar as well as blue collar occupations) which are so meaningless as, in effect, to make automatons of them and to strip them of their human dignity. It would be foolhardy to preach the theology of Vatican II on the dignity of work to people so entrapped. They must first regain their freedom.

We are all called upon to work for a change in the system which has thus entrapped them. In this connection, the Council was very emphatic in stating that, in addition to our daily round of duties in our particular occupation or profession, each of us has the added responsibility to engage, according to his or her talents, in this all-important work of social justice:

Christians who take an active part in modern

socio-economic development and defend justice and charity should be convinced that they can make a great contribution to the prosperity of mankind and the peace of the world. Whether they do so as individuals or in associations, let their example be a shining one. After acquiring whatever skills and experience are absolutely necessary, they should in faithfulness to Christ and His gospel observe the right order of values in their earthly activities. Thus their whole lives, both individual and social, will be permeated with the spirit of the beatitudes, notably with the spirit of poverty.

Whoever in obedience to Christ seeks first the kingdom of God will as a consequence receive a stronger and purer love for helping all his brothers and for perfecting the work of justice under the inspiration of charity.

In the vernacular of a young steelworker recently interviewed in a study of industrial unrest, what this means, so far as he and his fellow workers are concerned, is that the need of the hour is to give people better lives. "Listen," he said, "you have to give more if you want more. I don't mean just wanting cash—I mean a better life. The union has to give more too. Surely, bread and butter's important—but maybe we spend too much time just thinking about money. The companies (if they know what's good for them) and the unions too—everybody should be thinking, and soon, about giving people better lives."

Philosophers, theologians and social scientists could probably state this objective in more eloquent and high-sounding language, but it is doubtful that, with all their learning and sophistication, they could improve upon it as a statement of what millions of working people rightfully expect from an economic system which claims to be the most efficient and most productive in the history of the world.

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