

~~United States Catholic Conference~~  
Higgins, 1974 Labor Day Statement  
ADT 4003

SEP 4 1

# 1974 LABOR DAY STATEMENT

UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME LIBRARY  
Rev. Msgr. George Higgins  
Secretary for Research  
United States Catholic Conference  
COLLEGE LIBRARY  
VERTICAL FILE

FEB 01 1979

Catholic Church with Lab

The American labor movement finds itself, on labor's national holiday, caught between two conflicting fires. It is being severely criticized—for contradictory reasons which tend to cancel one another out—by self-appointed spokesmen for both the left and the right.

During the past year, for example, the movement has been caricatured, at one extreme, as "one of the most reactionary forces in America." Unions, we are told by another self-styled radical observer, "are no longer in a position of leadership in workers' struggles." The same writer says that the performance of union leaders in this country has been "despicable . . . during the past thirty years, and especially in the last two decades." In summary, the entire labor movement is accused by this writer of having sold out to corporate management and having "sided with employers in trying to impose labor peace upon a rebellious membership."

Still another writer has charged in somewhat the same vein that there has been a sharp drop in the quality of trade-union leadership in recent

years, with the result that "the unions . . . are incapable of thinking through their own future role and developing new approaches to their own structure and function."

At the other extreme, during this same period of time, contradictory charges have been levelled at the labor movement by spokesmen for the ultra-right. One of them says, for example, in a recent book on labor relations that American unions, far from being too weak or too docile and conciliatory, have acquired too much power for the good of the country. Paradoxically, however, he concludes that "trade unionism, as it presently operates in the United States, has made workers as a whole poorer than they would otherwise have been."

Another conservative critic, who holds an important post in the Federal government, has alleged within recent weeks that "unions are gouging the public" and has urged that, for the good of the nation, it be made a violation of the anti-trust laws for a single union to represent more than the employees of a single employer. More specifically, he would outlaw industry-wide collective bargaining and would prohibit government intervention of any kind in the economic affairs of the nation. The fact that one of the nation's most widely syndicated columnists has endorsed this reactionary proposal merely adds to the confusion and frustration which the labor movement must experience as it tries to make sense of the contradictory charges which its critics, at both ends of the spectrum, are levelling against it.

It goes without saying, of course, that the labor movement would be well advised to take constructive criticism seriously, regardless of where this criticism comes from. Organized labor, in other words, simply cannot afford to wrap itself protectively in the mantle of self-righteousness as though it were completely above legitimate criticism whether from its own members or from outside observers.

On the other hand, the labor movement cannot be expected to stop dead in its tracks simply to appease either its conservative or radical critics in the intellectual community, particularly in view of the fact that so many of these critics are more

interested—or at least give the impression of being more interested—in promoting their own pet theories than they are in promoting the best interests of organized labor. To be sure, American unions, like other organizations of comparable size and influence, ought to be spending as much time as possible “thinking through their own future role and developing new approaches to their own structure and function.” In doing so, however, they cannot afford to neglect their immediate task of organizing the unorganized, who can still be counted in the millions.

During the past year, the labor movement has made significant progress in this area on two related fronts. With an indispensable assist from religious and civic organizations throughout the United States, organized labor, by dint of a concerted and carefully coordinated national effort, made it possible for thousands of clothing workers in the Southwest to achieve the right to organize and bargain collectively with the Farah Company. Happily, from all accounts, the Farah Company and the union which represents its workers—the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America—have agreed to let bygones be bygones and have managed, within a few short months, to develop a constructive bargaining relationship which promises to be of mutual benefit to all concerned.

The Farah settlement—which was arrived at the hard way but, even at that, came sooner than most observers thought it would—was only the first step in what ought to be and promises to be a full-scale organizing drive, especially among Black and Spanish-speaking workers. Church-related agencies stand prepared to cooperate with this effort in the interest of achieving economic justice and the right of self-determination for millions of disadvantaged workers, a very high percentage of whom are Black and Spanish-speaking.

Current census figures dramatically reconfirm the fact that these workers, not only in the Southwest but throughout the nation, are lagging far behind the rest of the labor force in terms of wages and related benefits and that their unemployment rate is also disproportionately higher than the national average. The organization of these workers into bona fide unions will not auto-

matically solve all of their economic problems, but it would be an indispensable first step in the right direction. For this reason, we urge the entire labor movement to expand its organizing efforts and to give special attention to the urgent needs of Black and Spanish-speaking workers.

The Farah settlement, which involved city-based workers, was not the only major breakthrough achieved by organized labor during the past year. The national AFL-CIO also initiated a concerted drive to help the United Farm Workers Union win its 10-year struggle for justice and self-determination. Labor's immediate purpose in this regard is to help the farm workers regain the hard-won collective bargaining contracts which were taken—or, as they themselves insist, were stolen—from them during the past year by a rival union, namely, the International Brotherhood of Teamsters. The decision of the national AFL-CIO to endorse and support UFW's boycott and to assist the farm workers in other ways as well may prove to be the decisive factor in resolving the California farm labor dispute peacefully and with justice to all concerned.

Church organizations in ever-increasing numbers—Catholic, Protestant and Jewish—are also supporting the United Farm Workers Union in its desperate struggle for survival. This has led to the charge that they are prejudiced against the growers and the Teamsters. Nothing could be further from the truth. The numerous church organizations involved in the farm labor dispute have nothing against the Teamsters as an organization or against the growers as a group. Their sole purpose at this time is to help the farm workers of this nation achieve the right to organize into a union of their own choosing—a right which has been legally guaranteed to workers in every other major industry for many decades. Once this right has been effectively guaranteed to farm workers, the religious organizations involved in the California dispute will do everything they possibly can, in a spirit of reconciliation, to promote a constructive working relationship between UFW and the growers on the one hand, and on the other hand, between UFW and the Teamsters. The history of labor relations in this country

makes it abundantly clear, however, that this kind of relationship, which is long overdue in the agricultural industry, cannot be established until the workers themselves are granted the right to self-determination and have acquired enough economic power to enable them to bargain as equals with their employers.

It should come as no surprise to anyone, at this late date, that church groups are supporting the farm workers in their struggle to achieve this legitimate goal. If the churches were to walk away from this struggle and were to desert the farm workers in their hour of need, they would rightly be accused of having violated their own principles of justice and equity. In the case of the Catholic Church, these principles, as they relate to the subject of trade unionism and collective bargaining, were restated, as follows, by the Second Vatican Council:

Among the basic rights of the human person must be counted the right of freely founding labor unions. These unions should be truly able to represent the workers and to contribute to the proper arrangement of economic life. Another such right is that of taking part freely in the activity of these unions without risk of reprisal. Through this sort of orderly participation, joined with an ongoing formation in economic and social matters, all will grow day by day in the awareness of their own function and responsibility. Thus they will be brought to feel that according to their own proper capacities and aptitudes they are associates in the whole task of economic and social development and in the attainment of the universal common good.

When, however, socio-economic disputes arise, efforts must be made to come to a peaceful settlement. Recourse must always be had above all to sincere discussion between the parties. Even in present-day circumstances, however, the strike can still be a necessary, though ultimate, means for the defense of the workers' own rights and the fulfillment of their just demands. As soon as possible, however, ways should be sought to resume negotiations and the discussion of reconciliation.

It is our prayerful hope on Labor Day that by this time next year, at the very latest, the principles outlined in this passage from the Council's widely quoted Constitution on the Church in the Modern World will have been fully implemented in American agriculture. The sooner this occurs, the better it will be not only for the growers and the United Farm Workers Union, but also for the Teamsters, who have everything to lose and nothing to gain by holding to their present anti-UFW strategy.

We noted in the opening paragraphs of this annual Labor Day Statement that the American labor movement is caught between two conflicting fires. It is being told, at one extreme, that it is too weak to survive and, at the other extreme, that it has acquired such excessive power that it should not be permitted to survive in its present form. Our own view is that both of these judgments are extremely superficial and, to put it mildly, premature. We would argue, in other words, that the trade union movement should and will survive in the 70s—not only survive, but prosper—because the underlying economic problems which brought the movement into existence in the first place and which continue to be of great concern to workers are still with us and are not likely to be resolved within the foreseeable future. Accordingly this is no time to be talking about the demise of the trade union movement. With all its limitations, it still has an indispensable role to play in achieving social justice and, above all, in protecting the basic rights of the unorganized poor and of Black and Spanish-speaking workers in particular.

---

*ADDITIONAL COPIES AVAILABLE:* Single copy—15¢; 100-999 at \$4.00 per hundred; 1,000-4,999 at \$30.00 per thousand.

1974

UNITED STATES CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

1312 Massachusetts Avenue N.W.

Washington, D.C. 20005



