

Labor Day Ministry Moment  
Sunday, September 4, 2011

It is well that we pause as a nation to recognize and celebrate labor. We are grateful for all the hard work that people do to provide goods and services that contribute to our lives. And we remember the years of difficult and sometimes dangerous struggles that workers endured to acquire better working conditions and wages.

But this recognition of Labor Day brings mixed emotions. Labor is in trouble. On behalf of our Economic Justice Task Force, I would like to share our deep concerns. We are anxious about the future. The nature of labor is changing. What kind of jobs will be available for our children and grandchildren? There is a demand for a well-trained workforce and yet, we create barriers for people trying to participate in our economy. We put college education out of reach or exact a heavy debt burden on students and just do not meet the needs. This semester there are 5500 people at Wake Tech Community College on a waiting list for classes.

However, the current labor situation is so troublesome and distracting that we have less energy to think about the future. We all know the statistics – 25 million people unemployed, under employed or too discouraged to look for work. There are four and one-half applicants for every available job.

Each number in those statistics has a human face and a personal story. For those of us who have been part of a reduction in force and received the “pink slip”, we know how losing a job can upend your life. You can go through a grieving process and have to work through it. Your future is put on hold. I look at pictures of the thousands standing in line at job fairs (10,000 this week at one event) clutching a piece of paper which summarizes their lives and hoping someone will affirm their worth and their potential, so they can have some control over their future. People send out hundreds of job applications, only to be rejected again and again. How much rejection can a person tolerate before his/her spirit is wounded?

One unemployed woman said: “I feel as if I’m invisible. Like I’m not worth anything to society anymore.” (Lisa Banks, Germantown, MD)

I am haunted by Langston Hughes’s poem:

What happens to a dream deferred?  
Does it dry up  
like a raisin in the sun? ....  
Maybe it just sags  
like a heavy load  
Or does it explode?

(Source: “Harlem”, The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes)

In addition, we are aware of the immense wealth disparity in our country. The US has a larger income gap than any other advanced Western industrial nation. Our economic

inequity patterns are more common in the Third World and similar to a “Banana Republic”. Currently there are income ratios of more than 1000 to 1 between CEO’s income in the U.S. and the lowest paid workers. (Source: Agenda for a New Economy, David Korten) CEO’s now have 300 to 400 times or more the salary of an average worker. (Source: Executive PayWatch, AFL-CIO) In 1965 it was 24 to 1. (Source: Economic Policy Institute) Justice advocates suggest a 15 to 1 ratio would be more appropriate. (Source: Korten) There is a continuing erosion of the middle class which has experienced flat and stagnant wages since the 1970’s. People have coped by working longer hours, working more jobs or simply going into debt. (Source: Aftershock, Robert Reich)

But for too many people, poverty is a constant presence. Ghandi said that poverty is the worse form of violence. If your life has ever been touched by poverty, you know it leaves a mark.

And the children... The impact on our children is immense and may be long lasting. In the US there are around 20% of children living in poverty. They have been called the “Hard Times Generation”. These children seem to live in a world of invisibility. They try to understand. A neighbor watched as a family was forced to move out of their house and she approached one of the children saying, “I am so sorry you are losing your home.” The child replied, “We are not losing our home. We have a home; we just don’t have a house to put it in.”

Another child overheard adults talking about so many people not having jobs, so he asked, “Why don’t people have jobs? Is all the work done?”

How do we answer that?

There is a “profound gap between our human reality and our human possibility”. (Korten).

I often long for a modern day prophet who will forcefully speak truth to power. However, I can turn to words from the past. In the Biblical narrative, the prophets and Jesus were direct --economic justice is an imperative in our common lives.

Recently a memorial to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was unveiled in Washington. D.C. and will soon be dedicated. We immediately think of civil rights when we think of Dr. King, but at the time of his death he was focusing on economic justice for he noted that a person can have the right to sit at a lunch counter but what happens when he cannot afford to order any food.

Michael Honey said, “If in the past we have seen King primarily as a middle-class civil rights leader; it is now time to see him through the prism of his kinship to the poor, to working people, and to unions”.

Dr. King often spoke to unions because he believed that labor could come together and have a strong voice on the job and secure fair treatment. Few, if any, people voluntarily give up power. We remember that at his death in 1968, he was working with sanitation workers in Memphis TN to secure safer working conditions and better wages.

King's words about labor, work and justice continue to speak truth to us. On this Labor Day weekend, I share the following quotes:

“...it is a crime for people to live in this rich nation and receive starvation wages.”

“It is criminal to have people working on a full-time basis and a full-time job getting part-time income.”

“No labor is really menial unless you're not getting adequate wages. What makes it menial is the income, the wages.”

“Whenever you are engaged in work that serves humanity and is for the building of humanity, it has dignity, and it has worth.”

“It is a cruel jest to say to a bootless man that he should lift himself up by his own bootstraps. It is even worse to tell a man to lift himself up by his own bootstraps when somebody is standing on the boot.”

“There are three major social evils that are alive in our world today. And I ...urge each of you to maintain a keen sensitivity to these social evils that pervade our nation and our world. These three evils are the evil of war, the evil of economic injustice, and the evil of racial injustice.”

“I need not remind you that poverty, the gaps in our society, the gulfs between inordinate superfluous wealth and abject deadening poverty have brought about a great deal of despair, a great deal of tension, a great deal of bitterness.”

“It is not a constitutional right that men have jobs, but it is a human right.”

“In the end we will remember not the words of our enemies but the silence of our friends.”

And a final quote: “We will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope.” (Source: All Labor Has Dignity, edited by Michael Honey)

We are a resourceful nation. Why can't we create an economic system that values the long term well being of people and nature over financial return? Again, to use Langston Hughes's words (a world)... “where greed no longer saps the soul”. We need to rethink our systems and the perpetuation of structural injustices.

So what are the church and people of faith called to do at this time in our common history? Many of you have long done justice work, but can we do more or can we do justice work in a different way?

While I am looking for my modern day prophet, I am also reminded of an American Indian saying, "Do not look outside yourself for a leader."

On behalf of the Economic Justice Task Force, we would encourage engagement in the issues in whatever way works for you.

**I. We can stay informed:**

We can keep in touch with United for a Fair Economy, Economic Policy Institute and the NC Justice Center to understand what is happening.

**II. We can join forces.** We invite you to join our Task Force and/or support other groups who are working for solutions such as:

National Farm Worker Ministry,  
NC Peace Action

(We all know the relationship between peace and economics. Since 2001 we have spent over one trillion dollars on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Source: National Priorities Project)

Action for North Carolina children  
Historic Thousands on Jones Street.  
Democracy North Carolina,  
Interfaith Worker Justice  
Jobs with Justice

We would be glad to provide a list of choices.

In moments of discouragement, I remind myself that in my own life time I have witnessed some major positive changes, but I am also mindful that all progress, all justice has to be maintained, nurtured and protected because it can be gradually dismantled.

When my spirits begin to sag, I try to remember the words of Dorothy Day which gets my attention:

"No one has the right to sit down and feel hopeless; there is simply too much work to do."

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