

Religion-Labor Partnerships

Alive and Growing in the New Millennium

Kim Bobo

Today, activists are reviving the old labor-religious alliances that were such a key feature of labor's resurgence in the 1930s. As executive director of the National Interfaith Committee for Worker Justice, Kim Bobo draws on years of experience to offer a snapshot into the state of growing partnerships between labor and the religious community. Bobo explores the many ways in which the religious community has become involved in worker battles. At the same time, she also cautions us on the challenges in making such connections.

RELIGION-LABOR PARTNERSHIPS WERE INSTRUMENTAL IN THE BUILDING of the labor movement from the 1930s through the 1950s. But for a variety of reasons, the latter half of the century saw a decline in these working partnerships.

In the mid-1990s, the labor community refocused its energies on organizing low-wage workers and recognized the need to build stronger ties with the religious communities. At the same time, the religious community recognized that its twenty years of soup kitchens and shelters was not stopping the increase in poverty in society. People of faith

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began looking for additional ways to address economic injustice.

The National Interfaith Committee for Worker Justice emerged in 1996 to work with and help develop new religion-labor partnerships around the country. More than sixty affiliates now exist around the country rebuilding those partnerships. These groups create and implement educational programs for the religious and labor communities, mobilize religious support for workers who seek to organize a union, advocate for living-wage bills and increases in minimum wage, encourage employers to negotiate contracts within a reasonable period of time, and stand with workers who are on strike or locked out. In addition, groups are finding new ways to challenge sweatshops in their own communities by developing workers' centers (the Catholic labor schools of the new millennium), creating worker-friendly partnerships with government agencies charged with protecting worker rights, training congregational worker advocates, and distributing worker rights educational materials, especially with immigrant workers.

Challenges to Religion-Labor Partnerships

Despite the dramatic growth of religion-labor partnerships, there are many challenges, some old and some new, facing the work. These are some of the most common challenges faced by religion-labor groups.

Stereotypes and Ignorance

Too many leaders in the religious community do not understand the important role that unions play in society, or they have accepted the media stereotypes of unions. Thank goodness this perception is changing, but it is still a challenge and problem. The best way to address the problem is for unions to organize workers and engage new religious leaders in supporting workers. Do not involve only the "likely" suspects—the religious leaders who already understand the work. Find out where workers attend religious services and engage their religious communities, regardless of their understanding or preconceptions. People change not through talk, but through active involvement.

Religious Employers

Although there have been some giant steps forward in terms of relationships with large religious employers and unions (e.g., Catholic Health Care West's partnership with Service Employees International Union [SEIU]), there remains a general "anti-union" culture among religious health-care and social-service employers. Union members and organizers who have experienced these anti-union cultures are skeptical about partnering with the religious community. The current crisis in health-care and state social-service funding creates opportunities for unions and religious employers to work together for more just federal and state public policies.

Not Enough Organizing

In some communities, there are plenty of unions organizing, but that is not true across the board. The more labor organizes, the easier it is to build religion-labor partnerships because the labor movement is seen by workers and their religious leaders as a dynamic force with which to be associated.

Servicing Problems

Although some unions do a terrific job of servicing their members, others have spotty records, especially in servicing immigrant workers. This inconsistency creates problems when workers complain to their clergy about the lack of help the union is providing. Even though unions must shift resources to organizing if the union movement is to survive, it must find ways to strengthen its servicing of workers, especially immigrant workers.

Call a Collar

Even though there is much more strategic involvement of religious leaders early in a campaign than there was a few years ago, the biggest complaint from the religious community is that they get called

at the last minute to show up at a rally and say a prayer. People are willing to say a prayer, but they want to be much more engaged in understanding the overall strategy and planning tactics that are appropriate for the religious community. The last-minute calls are so common that they have names: “Rent a Priest,” “Call a Collar,” and “Dial a Minister.”

Money for Staff

The most effective interfaith religion-labor groups have staff devoted exclusively to building the coalition and reaching out to the religious community on a systematic basis. This approach requires dedicated staff, and staff cost money. If the work is to flourish, local religious and labor communities must support the partnerships.

Attacks from Large Companies

As the religion-labor work has grown stronger, so too have the attacks. Some attacks backfire: In San Diego, a hotel management told workers that the priests who had met with them were not really priests, they were just union organizers dressed up like priests. Needless to say, the priests were outraged and became even more engaged in the work.

Nonetheless, interfaith groups are receiving requests for IRS filings, calls from spies claiming they are students writing papers or freelance journalists, and even an occasional labor board charge or subpoena. Clearly, companies are beginning to take the work seriously. Such attacks require us to continue being “squeaky clean” on all legal, financial, and regulatory matters.

Opportunities for Religion-Labor Partnerships

The environment is right for strengthening religion-labor partnerships. The current public greed of corporate leaders has brought home the need for stronger worker protections. There is a growing network

of people of faith engaged in the work and organizational structures through which people can work. The visibility and dynamism of some of the organizing efforts, particularly among immigrants, engages new people of faith. And increasingly, unions recognize that the involvement of the religious community really matters in worker struggles.

There are incredible new opportunities for strengthening and expanding the work. Below are descriptions of some of the programs, structures, and tactics that seem to have great potential.

Workers' Centers

Throughout the first half of the last century, there were more than 100 Catholic labor schools that taught workers their rights in the workplace and taught them how to organize unions. Most of the workers who went to these labor schools were immigrants. Building on that tradition, interfaith groups are establishing interfaith workers' centers that create safe spaces for workers to learn about their rights, file complaints with government agencies, organize for collective action, and link with pro-bono attorneys. These workers' centers are intentionally pro-worker and pro-union. It is important that unions that work with immigrant workers be active on the steering committees for the centers to ensure that the centers function well. These workers' centers are serving multiple functions. They are:

Helping low-wage, primarily immigrant workers, who are not yet protected by unions. For interfaith groups, this service is incredibly important, given that clergy refer workers with workplace problems to the interfaith committee. If unions were not organizing in that sector or workplace, there was nothing that could be done to help. Now there are structures in place to provide concrete assistance. The centers help workers recover wages, get paid for overtime, address discrimination issues, and deal with health and safety problems.

Identifying leads for organizing. The first question that is asked in the workers' centers is whether the problem is an individual problem or one that is faced by many workers. Most problems are workplace-

wide problems, and thus workers are urged to bring their colleagues to the center. When workers come together, the center staff or volunteer talks with people about their options, including the possibility of organizing a union. Not all workers choose to organize, but some do. The workers' centers then work with the central labor council to be sure that workers are put in touch with the appropriate union.

Engaging volunteers in direct contact with workers. The most effective "education" for people of goodwill is to hear the stories of workers. Workers' centers allow people of faith to meet and learn from workers and provide many volunteer opportunities to really make a difference.

Conveying to immigrant workers that both the labor and religious communities are there to support them. Many immigrants do not understand that the two communities are strong supporters of all workers, not just their members. The workers' centers help both the religious and labor communities to get in touch with workers' issues and to be seen as a strong supporter.

Interfaith workers' centers are currently operational in Las Vegas, Chicago, Madison (Wisconsin), and Boston. Staff have been hired and are organizing centers in northwest Arkansas, western North Carolina, and eastern North Carolina. Plans are under way to create centers in the Twin Cities and Miami. In San Diego, the Interfaith Committee actively collaborates with a secular workers' center.

Sanctuary Congregations

Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice (CLUE), the religion-labor interfaith group in Los Angeles, has developed a new initiative called the Worker Sanctuary Program, which integrates some of its most effective ongoing strategies with new program components that are designed to specifically overcome the obstacle of worker fear. All the groups in California plan to develop Congregation Worker Sanctuary Programs (although the actual names may vary by city) and collectively revive the spirit of the sanctuary movement of the early

1980s, which defended the rights of Central American refugees. That spirit will be sought in defending the rights of workers.

CLUE's Worker Sanctuary Program organizes individual religious leaders and congregations to sign a pledge to accompany the workers in their struggles. The pledge describes five ways to accompany workers:

1. "Make visible" low-wage workers who are struggling for their rights. Carry out ongoing educational activities that provide opportunities for the workers to address the congregation.
2. Inspire and encourage the workers through special services, home visits, presence at actions, and so on.
3. Provide sustained advocacy.
4. Facilitate funding to support workers who lose their income as a result of their organizing.
5. Participate in public policy campaigns that advance workers' struggles and protect their rights.

CLUE's Worker Sanctuary initiative began in Los Angeles on March 17, 2002, in response to workers at the Doubletree Hotel in Santa Monica who were ready to go public with an organizing campaign in an environment in which it was clear that they would encounter serious retaliation. The first sanctuary service involved thirty clergy and seventy lay leaders as well as fifty workers involved in various campaigns. During the service, religious leaders (workers and non-workers together) formed a circle with the Doubletree workers in the center and everyone else around the outside, and the inner group and outer circle blessed one another. The service was followed by ten days of sustained advocacy and delegations of clergy and lay leaders and other community members to the Doubletree management. Even though two workers received warnings right after they went public, during the period of the delegation, no worker was fired or demoted. When the delegations ended, the management called CLUE's bluff by giving the top worker leader an indefinite suspension for her organizing activities. Within two days, CLUE held an action at the Doubletree restaurant with twelve clergy and thirteen lay leaders—the participants were thrown out for praying

for the workers and the management and demanding the worker's reinstatement. By the next day, CLUE had letters of support from the bishops of four major Protestant denominations and the Muslim Public Affairs Council, and more than 100 lay and community leaders had called the hotel. The worker was reinstated with a week of back pay.

CLUE leaders then decided to expand the initial sanctuary focus to include workers at three Santa Monica hotels that have retaliated against workers who are participating in organizing drives and which are opposing a current campaign to pass a pioneering living-wage ordinance at the ballot in November 2002. Since the beginning of the year, CLUE has been organizing monthly rotating vigils, highlighting each hotel's workers whose rights have been violated, and advocating for these workers with management. The vigils also provide an opportunity to encourage the workers involved in the campaign and for congregational leaders to bring donations and food for workers who have lost wages as a result of their organizing activities. CLUE has also chosen the Santa Monica Living Wage campaign as the first public policy focus of the Worker Sanctuary and is committed to involve sanctuary signatories and their congregations in active support of the campaign.

Although it is not called a formal sanctuary program, the Chicago Interfaith Committee and the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees International Union (HERE) built similar congregational support for hotel workers. The Chicago Interfaith Committee recruited more than 100 congregations to support the possibility of 7,000 hotel workers' going out on strike. Before the strike vote, congregations collected and contributed 8 tons of food goods for the workers, "just in case" the workers had to go out on strike. The food ensured that workers could vote their conscience without worrying about feeding their families. Approximately a hundred workers on the religious outreach committee worked with a Chicago Interfaith staff person and two seminary interns to build the support among congregations. Building a base of congregations that support workers is essential for protecting workers and educating more people in the congregations.

Future Religious Leaders

Almost 100 seminary and rabbinical students have participated in the Seminary Summer program, jointly sponsored by the AFL-CIO and the National Interfaith Committee for Worker Justice. The students have gone back to their schools and gone on to congregations with a pro-worker and pro-union perspective. In Chicago, a group of Seminary Summer graduates organized a group called “Seminarians for Worker Justice” that engaged students from seven different seminaries in supporting laundry workers at Carousel Linens seeking a contract. The seminarians led prayer vigils with the workers, organized delegations to talk with catering companies that rented Carousel Linens, and participated in events sponsored by the Union of Needletrades, Industrial, and Textile Employees (UNITE) to support the workers. Within three years, most of these students will be in leadership in congregations. They are and will be creating new relationships between labor and religion.

Every union that wants to build ties with the religious community should sponsor a Seminary Summer intern in the summer or should recruit field placement students from seminaries or rabbinical schools in its area. These students are on the cutting edge of building religion-labor partnerships. In Collins, Mississippi, two seminaries worked with the Laborers’ International Union of North America (LIUNA) in supporting poultry workers and reaching out to the local religious community for support. According to Regina Botterill, National Interfaith’s Seminary Summer coordinator, “In Chicago, two seminarians at UNITE helped organize laundry workers by planning actions, mobilizing clergy, and putting pressure on customers of the laundry owner. In Georgia, a seminarian at SEIU helped organize state workers in Atlanta, Macon, and Milledgeville and began building a clergy network to form the Atlanta Interfaith Committee for Worker Justice. In Los Angeles, two rabbinical students and a seminarian worked with HERE to coordinate a local faith-labor conference, support the Santa Monica living-wage campaign, and plan a powerful prayer vigil in front of the Doubletree Hotel.”

Public Policy

As the interfaith religion-labor groups around the country have developed their capacity, they have become more engaged in public policy issues. This trend is likely to increase significantly over the next few years.

Some of the religion-labor groups formed around local living-wage campaigns. Others have played or are playing the lead roles in

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mobilizing religious support. In San Diego, the Interfaith Council on Race, Religion, Economic and Social Justice collected 5,000 postcards from congregations as part of its Living Wage campaign. The New Orleans Interfaith Committee, although staffed completely by volunteers, provided a consistent religious voice to support the ACORN-led (Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now) citywide vote on a living wage. Almost all the religion-labor groups in New York State have mobilized religious support for living-wage campaigns, and some groups, like the Coalition for Economic Justice in Buffalo and the Central New York Labor-Religion Coalition, have spearheaded the campaigns (Buffalo successfully, and Central New York still working!).

The New York State religion-labor groups have been the most involved in statewide public policy. The groups passed a historic antisweatshop bill that allows schools to select ethical uniform producers, not just the lowest-cost producer (possible a sweatshop factory). This past year, the groups have worked tirelessly on a statewide farmworker bill. Next year, the California groups are considering support changes to the statewide Medi-Cal program because of the potential for raising wages and benefits for thousands of health-care workers. Groups in several states are joining forces with the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) and state social service providers to explore state “justice budgets”

that do not balance the state fiscal crises on the backs of social service clients and workers.

Nationally, the National Interfaith Committee for Worker Justice is developing its capacity to engage in selected worker-justice public policy debates. The organization worked diligently to raise the minimum wage. As the immigration reform efforts accelerate, it will be mobilizing religious support for a rational immigration policy. And over the next few years, the organization seeks to work in partnership with the labor movement to develop a comprehensive reform/improvement package for the Fair Labor Standards Act.

Chaplaincy Program

In Los Angeles, CLUE has developed an innovative chaplaincy program. The premise of worker-justice chaplaincy is to give area clergy uncomfortable with activism an opportunity to lend their pastoral skills to the movement, strengthening the resolve and supporting the souls of those workers most vulnerable on the front lines. Many Latino pastors have become engaged in the work through this program. Pastors accompany workers in their struggles for justice in the workplace. Pastors meet with workers, pray with workers, encourage them about God's presence in justice work, and stand with them in struggles for justice.

In Christian seminaries, most students are required to take a clinical pastoral education (CPE) program. Most students do a chaplaincy internship in a hospital, prison, or nursing home. Over the next few years, groups will be exploring the potential of worker chaplaincies as part of the seminary curriculum. Please note that these chaplaincies are not to be confused with the chaplains hired by poultry companies and other employers. True worker chaplains are not on the payroll of employers.

Government Partnerships

Over the last few years, the National Interfaith Committee for Worker Justice has developed strong partnerships with the agencies charged

with protecting worker rights, such as the Wage and Hour Division of the Department of Labor (DOL) and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). Although the organization and the government agencies do not always see eye to eye, the basic commitment to protecting workers and enforcing the law is the same. Most of the rank-and-file investigators and the regional administrators are truly doing herculean work and deserve our support and partnership. Too often, these government staff have felt all alone in requiring that unethical employers follow the laws and treat workers decently.

The Chicago Interfaith Committee on Worker Issues organized a collaboration of government agencies, religious groups, and community organizations to develop better outreach mechanisms and complaint-filing procedures for low-wage workers. A joint complaint form was developed that is accepted by staff at the Department of Labor Wage and Hour Division, Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), the EEOC, and the Illinois State Department of Labor. The complaint form is used by staff and volunteers to file complaints. More than 120 worker-rights advocates from congregations and community organizations have been trained to help reach out to workers and fill out the complaint forms. The collaboration is creating a network of eyes and ears in the community for protecting worker rights.

In Houston, the EEOC, the DOL Wage and Hour Division, the archdiocese, and the Mexican consulate partnered to reach out to workers via billboards and information at the offices of the Mexican consulate. Additional religious partners are being sought to strengthen this partnership.

In 2001, the DOL Wage and Hour division created a terrific worker-rights advocate manual called the AWARE Resource Handbook. This is a fabulous resource for helping religious advocates, business reps, and social service staff to understand and wade through the complexities of many U.S. labor laws.

Although partnerships with government agencies alone are not the answer to a more just society for workers (we still need a strong labor movement), they are important in finding additional avenues for protecting and enforcing workers' rights.

Islamic Participation

The fastest-growing segment of the religious community is the Islamic community. Increasingly, Islamic leaders are getting actively involved with interfaith religion-labor groups. Unions are recognizing the importance of developing ties with the Islamic community, given the growing number of Muslim workers they represent or seek to represent.

In 2001, the National Interfaith Committee for Worker Justice had a conference scheduled for September 12 in Washington, DC, on “Islam and Worker Justice.” That conference had to be postponed, but it and three more similar ones have been held around the country helping unions and people of faith understand Islam’s commitment to justice for workers. Two new resources have been developed to support groups: *The Holy Qur’an and Worker Justice* and *Understanding Islam* (both available at www.nicwj.org).

Making the Connections

Religion-labor partnerships are growing and flourishing across the country, but given the crisis for workers in the society, the partnerships must be expanded and deepened. Everyone in the faith community and everyone in the labor community can help. The coming years will require a new level of partnership, commitment, and courage to bring forth justice in today’s world. Alone, it is hard to make a difference. Together, we can bring about lasting changes.

To learn more about religion-labor partnerships, visit the National Interfaith Committee website at www.nationalinterfaith.org and join the organization to receive its resources in Faith Works. Contact a local interfaith group or contact Kristi@nicwj.org about forming a new one.

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