

AN OLD ALLIANCE FROM A GLOBAL ANGLE

"[The Gap] could deal with the unions, they could deal with the solidarity people, they could deal with the women's groups and the trade people. But they couldn't stand it when on top of all that, the religious people joined in."

—Charles Kernaghan, NLC Executive Director.

The alliance between labor and the church is not only one of the oldest relationships in the US; it is also one of the most potent. Even in Puritan New England, according to Jama Lazerow's *Religion and the Working Class in Antebellum America*, many labor activists were "spurred on by the pious pronouncements of sympathetic clergy people." Saul Alinsky's, *Let Them Call Me Rebel*, recounts how key church leaders rendered great assistance to the striking packinghouse workers in Chicago after the Second World War. More recently, we see the strong presence of the church within labor and community industrial retention efforts such as the Naugatuck Valley Project and the Tri-State Conference on Steel.

Throughout the 1980's and up to the present, many congregations have participated in networks to assist labor activists in countries like El Salvador and Guatemala. As seen during the Gap campaign, the existence of such a network provides an effective ally for the U.S. labor movement. Comments Rev. David Dyson, who organized clergy nationwide to pressure the Gap, "The Gap campaign showed the potential of a Labor/Religion alliance. Alone, the labor people were being dismissed by the Gap as 'Big Labor seeking revenge for the NAFTA defeat.' The addition of the religious presence and pressure brought the issue back to the moral and ethical questions of the exploitation of workers in Central America and job flight from the U.S."

Indeed, one can only imagine the looks on the faces of the Gap's public relations consultants when presented with a letter from such an organization as the Chicago Religious Leadership Network on Latin America (CRLN). Signed by fifteen religious leaders, including the bishop of Chicago's Episcopal diocese, the letter was addressed to Mr. Millard S. Drexler, CEO of the Gap, and called for: "A new investigation into ongoing credible claims of abusive labor practices at Mandarin International."

The Gap responded by requesting a personal meeting between Gap Vice President Stan Raggio and representatives of CRLN. It was that meeting, according to sources, that convinced the Gap to meet and negotiate with NLC.