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# Christianity and Labour: Addressing Current Crises Through Founding, Partnering, and Supporting

## Work Research Foundation

Summer 2003

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*Second in a series addressing the roots, current state, and future prospects of the Christian labour movement.*

The Industrial Revolution in the mid-1800s spawned a crisis in the development of human beings as both free, unique individuals and as minuscule moving parts of the giant machine-like process that made many products of advanced technology available.

As I survey my immediate environment, I am in some ways grateful for this human machine. The Industrial Revolution was the beginning of readily available, stereo quality music that I can play right in my home, without the band, without the orchestra. I can enjoy solitude even while I am accompanied by a whole gang of musicians, and my solitude is certainly enhanced.

The Industrial Revolution marked a great increase of inexpensively packaged knowledge in the form of printed books. Only a few steps away from me right now are the stories of South American revolutionaries, of medieval knights and ladies, of the founding jazz musicians in New Orleans. There is profound beauty in our immediate capacity to connect with other people and worlds through the written word.

The Industrial Revolution has allowed me to travel the world on a shoestring budget, sleep comfortably on nights when 40-below winds blast the walls of my house, enjoy late night film discussions with devoted friends, and use the Internet to connect with people of faith around the world. And, given all of these benefits, I'm incredibly grateful that the crisis of the Revolution is over!

### Or is it?

A look around my home, while inspiring on account of the comforts I enjoy, cannot but remind me of the distance we still must travel to see an end to the oppression of the worker. There is clothing made in Thailand, and there's no guarantee that it was not stitched and woven by desperate eight-year-old fingers under dangerous conditions. There is a backpack assembled in Mexico, potentially by a young single mother who fears being fired for associating with union representatives. Undeniably, there is a new crisis facing today's worker, especially if he or she lives in Asia, Africa, or Latin America or is a low-wage worker in an industrialized country.

The first article in this series focused on the origins of the Christian labour movement and the success of the faith community in affecting the initial crisis of the Industrial Revolution. A review of the church's history in this area revealed a small and disorganized movement that, by grace and the hard work of a few, established a solid presence in most Western countries and was beginning to have a global affect.

The next step is to review how far we have come since then.

The industrial labour machine that was established in the West during the Industrial Revolution, while not without problems, today has developed into a reasonably well-governed machine. In most cases, an industrial worker can expect to be compensated appropriately when injured on the job, paid a wage that will support a family, and given benefits that attempt to alleviate the unnecessary stress of the unknown. However, this situation has not occurred because the machine was left to run on its own and self-correct.

Christians have played and are playing an integral, active role in maintaining the machine, but this role does not look the same across the board. The various relationships between Christianity and organized labour today can be summarized in three categories—founding, partnering, and supporting—and in each category there are strong examples of how such relationships can be positive and productive.

In the founding category, a professional team of maintenance experts in the form of organized labour has been on hand to make adjustments to the labour machine, and original Christian labour movements have been growing right alongside other non-religious movements. Two strong representatives in this area are the Christian Labour Association of Canada (CLAC) and the National Federation of Christian Trade Unions in the Netherlands (CNV).

These organizations and others represent one current relationship between Christianity and labour which is a founding relationship. Both CNV and CLAC find their origins in early Christian social thought pertaining to the plight of early industrial workers. While still strongly and admittedly based on Christian values of justice, solidarity, and stewardship, these organizations are open to workers of any faith background who affirm the same values.

As a Christian labour organization, CLAC is exemplary. With approximately 25,000 members, it is the 35th largest union among about 1,000 unions in Canada and is involved in directly addressing such problems as worker shortages in construction and health care and job security in a changing manufacturing industry.

While basic worker rights have been established, CLAC is learning how to respond to the new challenges presented by globalization and free trade. Under this new global economy, if Canadian employees assert their rights in a particular area—for example, the right to organize—"and the company responds by moving the work to another country, the right is quite hollow," explains Ed Bosveld, a CLAC representative in Ontario.

Unlike many labour organizations, CLAC does not condemn globalization and free trade wholesale; rather, it seeks in all agreements what is most just for all parties involved. This includes not taking an antagonistic view of the relationship between management and employees but exploring how both parties can together cultivate a community that serves the well-being of all involved, and this commitment is certainly contributing to the longevity of certain Christian labour organizations.

Unfortunately, the presence of organized labour—religious or non-religious—in the industrialized West does not ensure justice for all workers, especially for low-wage workers, most of whom are employed in various service industries. In addition to globalization, another challenge faced by CLAC and many other organizations is using organized labour to address justice issues for workers with wages at or slightly above a country's minimum wage.

Speaking from the experience of current efforts to organize 500 telemarketing workers, Bosveld contends that there are a number of obstacles to organizing low-wage workers, including lack of education on rights, fear of being fired with no marketable skills for obtaining a new job, high levels of turnover, and the ability of the targeted company to relocate easily and inexpensively in the face of too much pressure.

Religious groups seem to have the highest rate of success in this area when they approach Christianity and labour from a partnership perspective (as opposed to the founding relationship of organizations such as CNV and CLAC). There are numerous examples of religious leaders and organizations successfully taking action on behalf of low-wage workers, so much so that the AFL—CIO in the United States has even established formal programs for reaching out to religious groups. "Increasingly, unions are building long-term relationships with the religious community that have led to significant roles for religious leaders in such workers' struggles as the Detroit newspaper lockout," states James B. Parks in an article on the AFL—CIO's website.

The most successful efforts seem to be those that are locally specific or very focused on a single issue. For example, "there is 'no question' that religious activist groups played the key role initially in getting the government to probe poultry practices," writes William Bole, reporting on an interview with Richard Lobb, spokesman for the National Chicken Council. A national concentration of activist efforts in the U.S., mostly by religious groups, resulted in a May 2002 settlement of \$10 million in a suit against Perdue Farms, Inc. for not paying workers—who only make about US \$7 per hour to begin with—for the time they spent putting on and taking off special gear required to reduce workplace injuries.

Another successful example of local religious efforts include standing alongside members of Hotel Employees & Restaurant Employees Local 17 in efforts to get Regency Plaza Hotel in Minneapolis to honor an existing union contract. The battle tactic? Local clergy holding 15-minute prayer vigils in the hotel lobby for five days in a row until management agreed to honour the contract and rehire several fired workers.

And the actions of this small group represent the larger efforts of the Twin Cities Religion and Labor Network, of which Rev. Nancy Anderson is a member. "Part of ministering to our flocks is to ensure they are treated with respect, with dignity," says Rev. Anderson. "That's both the biblical and union image of how workers should be treated. We in the religious community believe in the right of workers to organize. In fact, many of us believe it is the responsibility of workers to organize." Many other groups like Anderson's exist and many more are forming, given what Anderson points out as a natural alliance between unions and religious groups in addressing issues for low-wage workers in the industrialized West.

But what about the masses of workers in the Third World, many of whom are children and do not enjoy any of the basic rights of even low-wage workers in industrialized countries? What is so devastating about this crisis, especially in Asian, African, and Latin American countries, is that various forms of oppressing workers are perfectly legal and, even if not quite legal, are encouraged as a means of economic development for the country as a whole. The statistics are certainly sobering:

- At current rates, 2003 will see 1.3 billion people living on less than a dollar per day.
- There are currently 530 million working poor who live on less than a dollar per day.
- Approximately 211-million children ages 5—14 are currently employed inappropriately.

As opposed to founding and partnering relationships, Christian individuals and organizations generally seem to seek a relationship of direct or indirect support of movements that seek to improve the lives of Third World workers. For example, organizations such as CNV and CLAC are member organizations of the World Confederation of Labour (WCL), which was originally the International Federation of Christian Trade Unions (IFCTU) based in the Netherlands. In the 1950s and 1960s, IFCTU found it would expand its influence by becoming an interfaith organization that used shared faith values as a starting point for advocating and organizing for worker justice.

As of October 2001, the WCL united 144 trade unions in 116 countries with over 26-million members, most of whom were from Third World countries. Affiliated organizations, such as BATU (Brotherhood of Asian Trade Unionists), CLAT (Latin American Workers Central), and DOAWTU (Democratic Organization of African Workers' Trade Unions), are addressing worker justice issues in areas of extreme need. These organizations do, however, fall under the category of non-religious labour organizations, though they are supported by donations and membership from specifically Christian labour organizations.

More direct involvement of Christians in extreme crisis areas can be found in the U.S.-Mexico Border Project, a collaboration of several organizations including the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), to work for fair treatment of workers in maquiladoras (or export processing plants) near the border. According to a report on this project, "In Mexican manufacturing, real wages have fallen by more than 20 percent since 1994 . . . [while] the cost of the official "'market basket' of food, housing, and essential services has risen by 247 percent since 1994."

In addition to educating maquiladora workers on rights, health, gender, and benefits, the collaborating organizations also help workers organize and democratize unions. According to Ricardo Hernandez, the AFSC director of the border project, "The AFSC also uses shareholder activism to bring to the same table maquiladora workers we work with and U.S. corporate executives. We foster that dialogue." These combined efforts have "resulted in tangible progress for the well-being of tens of thousands of people at the border, especially in the last ten years." The AFSC and others have successfully identified that, since the cycles that keep so many people in poverty often begin and end in wealthy industrialized countries, calling those countries to direct accountability is an integral part of successful organizing.

In addition to the AFSC, Catholic groups have also been directly involved in organizing efforts for worker justice. While the initial perspective of the Catholic church on labour organizing was quite ambiguous, the Catholic worker movement, begun in the 1930s, was an unofficial expression of support and proclaims as strongly today in an article from the Winona (MN) Catholic Worker that "freedom from exploitation, production for the common good, a living wage, safe conditions, and the right to organize are all necessary components of justice for workers."

A 1981 encyclical from Pope John Paul II even officially declares unions to be "an indispensable element of social life, especially in modern industrialized societies. [Unions] are indeed a mouthpiece for the struggle for social justice, for the just rights of working people in accordance with their individual professions." These principles find an actual outlet in the work of Cardinal Roger Mahoney with immigrant workers in California, of the late Monsignor George Higgins through the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, and of many other priests and lay leaders in the Catholic church.

While the AFSC is effectively using labour organization to address significant issues for workers in Mexico and Catholics have developed a strong tradition in the area of labour, such direct involvement is rare for Christian denominations, and the rarity of this occurrence doesn't seem to coincide with Christianity's general affirmation of labour organization as a means to worker justice. On the website of the National Interfaith Committee for Worker Justice (NICWJ) are statements from 10 Christian denominations that directly support a believer's right to unionize and affirm the value of unions. As Rev. Jim Lewis, president of Delmarva Poultry Justice Alliance, states on the AFL—CIO website, "There is no separation between spirituality and social action. . . It's not enough to bury people, marry them and visit them when they're sick. This economy is hurting people and we have to call the church to action."

Unfortunately, in spite of solid values, the church as a whole seemed to forget its obligations to the worker as the Industrial Revolution waned. Secular labour organizations are even in the interesting position of having to reach out to the religious community and train leaders in aspects of worker justice in a sort of reverse evangelism.

As Father Sinclair Oubre of the Catholic Labor Network summarizes the role of the Catholic church in organizing labour, "At best, it is a mixed role. Our Church says all the right things. However, the amount of energy it puts into this issue varies wildly. And it depends if the union is attempting to alleviate poverty among low-wage Church workers, or other low wage-workers. It also depends how close it is to home, and how much these improvements will cost the Church in high costs and expenses."

While the Church has several formal structures in place to address labour issues, Father Sinclair reports that the position of an individual diocese within the Catholic church can be downright antagonistic to organized labour. This pattern of ambiguous and sometimes harmful relationships is not just limited to the Catholic church but applies to most Christian denominations. As far as we have come since the Industrial Revolution in the areas of wages, child labour restrictions, and workplace safety, the church has not progressed as well ideologically and is still marked by inconsistency. Inconsistencies exist among various denominational ideas about labour unions, as well as between verbal affirmations of unions, but actions do not uphold those affirmations.

However, we are potentially at a point of revival in the relationship between Christianity and labour. The preceding paragraphs contain numerous examples of Christians who are choosing to found, maintain, partner with, and support, both directly and indirectly, movements for worker justice. At the same time, as more information becomes available about the effects of capitalism and globalization on the developing world, it is becoming harder to ignore the fact that the crisis is far from over. We are facing a new host of challenges in every country, and many Christians are stirring, often in connection with such interfaith efforts as the WCL and NICWJ.

How will we address these new frontiers in the future, especially in Asia, Africa, and Latin America? Are we merely at a point of brief resurgence in Christian action for worker justice, or is this movement a lasting one that will prove the church a leader in addressing areas of crisis for labourers worldwide in the twenty-first century? Will specifically Christian movements be absorbed by interfaith efforts, and, if so, how will that affect the movement? An exploration of the potential future relationship between Christianity and labour will be the subject of the next article in this series.

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www.cfomaquiladoras.org is produced in cooperation with the  
**Mexico-U.S Border Program**  
of the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC)



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