

RELIGION



A woman cuts chicken in a Delaware poultry plant. An Episcopal priest has counseled workers with amputated fingers or injured limbs. BY MICHELLE FRANKFURTER—RELIGION NEWS SERVICE

A Reunion of Church, Labor

Religious Leaders Embracing Workers' Causes With '60s-Like Zeal

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GEORGETOWN, Del.—The Rev. Jim Lewis was a mystery when he arrived here three years ago to minister to Latino poultry workers. Company management heard he was in bed with the unions, and union members didn't know what to make of the charismatic, gray-haired priest who talked of higher wages and safer plants.

"I said, 'Who are you really working for, the AFL or the CIA?'" said John Clough, now on the staff of Local 27 of the United Food and Commercial Workers Union. Lewis responded, "The Episcopal diocese."

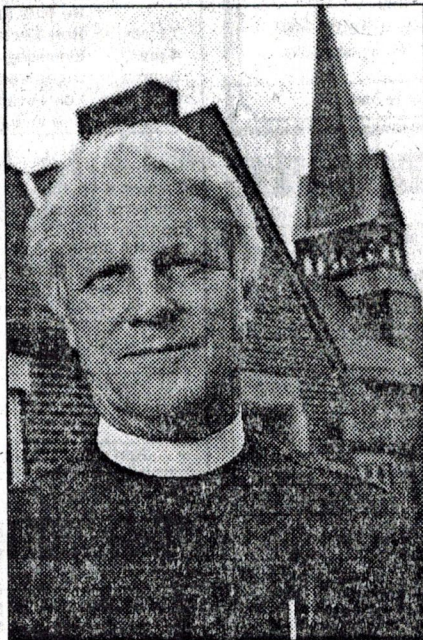
Not since Cesar Chavez and the farm worker movement in the 1960s have so many religious leaders embraced the rights of the poorest workers to earn a living wage in a safe environment.

Protestant, Catholic and Jewish leaders have joined a United Farm Workers of America campaign seeking fair wages and better working conditions for California's strawberry workers; many religious leaders are part of coalitions working to eliminate sweatshops, child labor and poultry industry abuses. In Detroit, Roman Catholic Bishop Thomas Gumbleton and retired United Methodist Bishop Jesse DeWitt were part of a coalition of religious leaders supporting striking newspaper workers.

The National Baptist Convention USA, the country's largest black denomination, and the United Food and Commercial Workers are backing discrimination claims brought by African American employees against Florida-based Publix Super Markets Inc. And leaders of 18 denominations have formed the National Interfaith Committee for Worker Justice in Chicago "to forge a new relationship between the religious community and labor organizations."

Religious activists like Lewis say their faith compels them to minister to workers. "When I see a woman working on the poultry line whose hands have been abused, my religious sensibility tells me the body of Christ is being abused," said Lewis, who has counseled workers who have amputated fingers and gnarled limbs from repetitive stress injury.

"When workers come in and tell me they are being tricked out of their bonuses, I can hold their hands. If they get fired, I can give them a couple of dollars. What I can't do is change the power base," he said. "For that, you need a union."



BY MICHELLE FRANKFURTER—RELIGION NEWS SERVICE

Activists such as the Rev. Jim Lewis say their faith leads them to support workers.

John Sweeney, president of the AFL-CIO, said: "It's a natural relationship to develop. Religious leaders are very active in so many of the areas we're active in. At the end of the day, churches and unions stand for a society where an individual is valued as a child of God."

The religion-labor alliance "has a long history," said Sweeney, an active Catholic who has met with the pope and once considered entering the priesthood. It was Pope Leo XIII's 1891 labor encyclical *Rerum Novarum*—which affirmed the right to organize—that strengthened the bond between Catholics and unions.

In addition, late last century, Jewish leaders began organizing garment work-

ers in New York City. Wealthier Protestants tended to be aligned with management, Lewis said. But that wasn't the case in the West Virginia coal mines in the early 1900s, when pro-union Protestant ministers faced the wrath of company guards. Throughout much of that period, Roman Catholic priests served as mediators often called on by the federal government to help settle major labor disputes in industries they once helped organize.

In the 1960s, religious activists from many traditions joined with Chavez and the farm workers in what was less an organizing drive than a movement infused with Catholic imagery.

"There were sisters and priests everywhere, and everyone wanted to get arrested," said Monsignor George G. Higgins, 81, the doyen of Catholic labor priests, who mediated in the dispute between Chavez and the growers.

By the late 1970s, the relationship between religion and labor was waning, said Higgins, professor emeritus at Catholic University.

"A lot of younger clergy moved into other areas," he said. Many "felt the labor movement was too much a part of the establishment."

Higgins's strong ties with organized labor are credited with keeping the AFL-CIO from adopting an abortion rights stance in the late 1980s. Today, when the growth of unions often depends on labor's ability to attract women, the AFL-CIO remains neutral on abortion.

Liberal clerics parted company with union leaders over their support of the Vietnam War and U.S. policy in Central

America and over corruption in the Teamsters and other unions.

Unions, in turn, "developed a siege mentality," said Kim Bobo, executive director of the National Interfaith Committee for Worker Justice. "They didn't focus on organizing, and they didn't look for allies."

Now, Sweeney said, unions are looking for allies.

Not everyone is responding. For most evangelicals, said Billy A. Melvin, former executive director of the National Association of Evangelicals, labor issues are "not on the screen." The Southern Baptist Convention has not come up with a statement about unions in more than 50 years.

Even Lewis's denomination, the Episcopal Church, has been less than enthusiastic. "You can read all the [labor] resolutions before breakfast," he said.

Evely Laser Shlensky, chairman of the Commission on Social Action of Reform Judaism, said the Jewish tradition "is replete with instruction on how to treat oppressed workers. The Talmud states that if one does not protest an injustice, one is complicit in that injustice. Seeing farmworkers stooped over and knowing the conditions in which they live ... makes me think if I don't add my voice to the protest, I'm complicit."

How best to protest is subject to debate. Jewish leaders are part of the Strawberry Commission, led by the AFL-CIO and the United Farm Workers. But some of the same Jewish groups, Shlensky said, are part of a Los Angeles-

Churches Again Embracing Workers' Causes

UNIONS, From B7

based Jewish Commission on Sweatshops, which has targeted Jewish manufacturers and is working independently of unions.

"Unions are . . . not the only way," she said. "There is moral suasion, consumer pressure and government investigation and enforcement of existing labor codes. We are very aware that some people in the community we speak to are not fond of labor unions."

Concerned Pastors of the Upper Ohio Valley is holding prayer vigils to support both labor and management in the Wheeling-Pittsburgh Steel strike. "We pray [that the strike] will not divide families and friends," said the Rev. Douglas George, of Finley Methodist Church. "As soon as you come down on one side, you've lost your credibility with the other side."

However, Gumbleton, the Detroit bishop, said religious leaders should take a stand on work-related moral issues even if it causes division. "If somebody is doing scab labor, it's wrong," he said. "It takes away the leverage a strike is supposed to bring to get bargaining going."

Robert Giles, until recently the editor and publisher of the Detroit News, said Gumbleton and other "so-called moral leaders were blind to the fact that it's legal for us to hire permanent replacement workers. They saved our business. . . . The moral issue for us was how to sustain the viability of the replacement workers."

The Rev. Robert Sirico, president of the Acton Institute, a think tank based in Grand Rapids, Mich., said he's "not aware of Catholic social teaching prohibiting replacement workers." Gumbleton said, however, that "moral doctrine includes social justice doctrine, and the mistreatment of workers is violent abuse."

Even pro-union leaders say choosing sides

can be tough. Just six months after Lewis arrived in Delaware, a group of poultry workers at Mountaire of Delmarva, a union plant, told him that the company had fired an undocumented Guatemalan worker who had lost a finger while cutting chicken. The workers contacted Local 27 of the UFCW for help, and the union didn't respond. Now they were considering a wildcat strike.

"The last thing I wanted was a strike at a union plant," Lewis said. "But the union wasn't doing anything. They didn't even have shop stewards. I had to go with the workers." He and three Catholic nuns joined about 200 workers in a strike that led to negotiations with management and eventually to an overhaul of Local 27.

The president of Mountaire would not comment. But Harry Dukes, owner of Eastern Shore Poultry, reflected the sentiments of many local managers when he called for a "separation between church and state," meaning church and labor. And he said he resents what he called union attempts to infringe on a company he calls his family.

The role of religious leaders in union actions still is evolving. Sweeney said they should "support individual workers and do everything they can to assist. . . . The union has to run the organizing campaign."

Higgins agreed. "Most priests haven't organized anything more than a funeral," he said. "My general practice is to stay as far away as you can from internal politics and decision-making."

The Rev. Bennie Mitchell, director of labor relations for the National Baptist Convention, however, said unions need to involve clergy in strategy. "Things can be done in a spiritual way," he said, "and we can give God a chance to move on the oppressor."

Cesar Chavez organized the farm worker movement in the 1960s.

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