

COMPENDIUM ON CHURCH'S SOCIAL TEACHING PART 65

The dignity of work – The relationship between labour and capital 2 – Maintaining the proper balance in the globalised economy

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“The relationship between labour and capital often shows traits of antagonism that take on new forms with the changing of social and economic contexts. In the past, the origin of the conflict between capital and labour was found above all ‘in the fact that the worker put their powers at the disposal of the entrepreneurs, and these, following the principle of maximum profit, tried to establish the lowest possible wages for the work done by the employees (*Laborem Exercens*)’.

In our present day, this conflict shows aspects that are new and perhaps more disquieting: scientific and technological progress and the globalisation of markets, of themselves a source of development and progress, expose workers to the risk of being exploited by the mechanisms of the economy and by the unrestrained quest for productivity (*L'Osservatore Romano*).”

Globalisation refers to the breaking down of national boundaries and rendering all aspects of human activity on to a worldwide domain. It represents a new phase in capitalist development, which involves not only production and distribution but also cultural and political changes.

It brings with it the need for countries and businesses to be more flexible and cost effective in order to survive competition. Because of this quest to remain competitive some basic labour/worker rights can be neglected and outright abuses take place.

These include:

- unsafe working environments resulting in injury and poor health
- little or no job security for workers (someone else will do your job for less money)
- informalisation of work
- conflicts between contract workers and full time workers
- increasing levels of unemployment
- inadequate wages
- child labour
- stifling of workers associations/unions

However, while these are the more obvious abuses and risks to labour, there are other abuses that are less obvious. “The reference here is not only to the many pockets of non-work, concealed work, child labour, underpaid work, exploitation of workers – all of which still persist today – but also to new, much more subtle forms of exploitation of new sources of work, to over-working, to work-as-career that often takes on more importance than other human and necessary aspects, to excessive demands of work that makes family life unstable and sometimes impossible, to a modular structure of work that entails the risk of serious repercussions on the unitary perception of one’s own existence and the stability of family relationships.”

Those of us who want to survive in the global economy, now begin the rat race – of forever doing courses to keep abreast; after all, a degree has a shelf life of five years.

In the workplace, we must arrive before the boss gets there in the morning, and make sure we leave the office after most of the other staff, because that proves we are dedicated workers, and we cannot appear to be less committed than our colleagues. We must be first in line for the promotion or any training opportunity.

What happens is that the sense of team spirit in the organisation is eroded. The organisation becomes a place of stress. Further, this extra time dedicated to work erodes from family time and places a strain on family relationships.

Children are left at school for long hours after school has ended, there is no one to assist them with homework; dinner is collected at the nearest fast food outlet, and the list can go on.

“If people are alienated when means and ends are inverted, elements of alienation can also be found in the new contexts of work that is immaterial, light, qualitative more than quantitative, ‘either through increased sharing in a genuinely supportive community or through increased isolation in a maze of relationships marked by destructive competitiveness and estrangement (*Centesimus Annus*)’ ”