

## COMPENDIUM ON CHURCH'S SOCIAL TEACHING PART 79

### **The rights of workers: The right to strike**

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Strike action refers to a work stoppage caused by the mass refusal by employees to perform work. Strikes usually take place in response to grievances that employees feel management are ignoring. Strikes are sometimes used to put pressure on governments to change policies. Occasionally, strikes de-stabilise the rule of a particular political party/government.

Strike action is nothing unusual to the Trinidad and Tobago culture. Almost weekly there is some group striking. Employees, usually under the umbrellas of unions, strike for better working conditions and better salaries. We have seen examples of strikes in both the public and private sector.

There are also strikes by communities, who wish to highlight their poor living conditions, including poor roads, no water, poor education facilities and high crime rates. There are also strikes in Trinidad and Tobago to protest very important policy decisions by the government, a very notable example is the proposal to build the Alumina Smelter Plant.

“The Church’s social doctrine recognises the legitimacy of striking ‘when it cannot be avoided, or at least when it is necessary to obtain a proportionate benefit,’ (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*) when every other method for the resolution of disputes has been ineffectual (*Gaudium et Spes*).

Striking, one of the most difficult victories won by labour union associations, may be defined as the collective and concerted refusal on the part of workers to continue rendering their services, for the purpose of obtaining by means of such pressure exerted on their employers, the State or on public opinion either better working conditions or an improvement in their social status.

Striking ‘as a kind of ultimatum (*Laborem Exercens*) must always be a peaceful method for making demands and fighting for one’s rights; it becomes ‘morally unacceptable when accompanied by violence, or when objectives are included that are not directly linked to working conditions or are contrary to the common good’ (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*).”

The Church has given some clear guidelines on what constitutes appropriate strike action for workers and the appropriate conditions for strike action. These principles can be applied to all strikes and not just those involving the relationship between the employer and the employee.

Striking must be used as a last resort and must be done peacefully. We are all aware of the repercussions of strikes that occur in key areas of service particularly in the public service. Sectors that come easily to mind are health, education and transport. A hospital which is unmanned can lead to death of patients.

Schools unsupervised can lead to children losing valuable learning time and also afford them opportunities to get involved in activities that are harmful to them. This is not to say that professionals in these sectors should not strike.

Peaceful striking is also key. There has been a growth in recent times, as evidenced by newspaper articles and television news reports, of protests that have led to violent acts, such as blocking of roads and burning of debris.

This behaviour is not acceptable as it does not support the achievement of the common good for all. Blocking roads inconveniences others who are genuinely seeking to get through their business of living; burning debris in public places destroys the cleanliness of the environment.

The challenge is for us (employees and labour unions) to determine if and when to strike. We must carefully assess whether we have utilised all other means, and that they were deemed ineffective. Further, when the decision is made to strike the aim must be to achieve the common good for all

Next week we move into section VI of chapter 6: Solidarity Among Workers. The first section deals with the importance of unions.

Persons interested in purchasing the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* may contact the CCSJ at Archbishop's House - 622-6680.