

## **COMPENDIUM ON CHURCH'S SOCIAL TEACHING PART 80**

### **Solidarity among workers: The importance of unions**

**By Nadine Bushell 31.12.06**

**Member of the Catholic Commission for Social Justice**

There are many persons who do not see any value to having unions or workers associations. Employers, entrepreneurs and some governments may be sceptical of unions, as there is a fear that they can encourage employees to disrupt productive activity, which may result in financial losses.

In Trinidad and Tobago there have been many instances where unions have “shut down” various sectors in the economy, in their attempt to bargain for better conditions for their employees.

From the employee standpoint, there are instances where workers are hesitant to join unions, for fear of being victimised by employers. Some employees see no benefit to unions, or at least no benefit to them paying dues to participate in union activities.

Many take the selfish position that there is no need to join a union because when union negotiations prove beneficial, everyone benefits, members as well as non-members. Many workers see unions as organizations that can bail them out of trouble in the workplace if and when it comes; others see them as strictly to bargain for increased wages and better working conditions.

This is a very limited view of unions. In the Caribbean, the labour movement made significant contributions to the development of the society. In the 1930s, there were a series of labour rebellions in the English speaking Caribbean, which sought to address some of the social changes that resulted from Emancipation and the Great Depression.

This led to an increasingly conscious working class and sought to address the lack of adequate and efficient machinery through which workers' grievances could be channelled and the recognition of the workers' right to organise and negotiate.

Trade unions along with political parties took leading roles in Federation and Independence. Trade Unions and political parties were often closely linked. Political experience emerged directly from the difficult growth of labour organizations throughout the Caribbean. Trade unionisation derived from the plethora of mutual aid and benevolent societies that existed from the period of slavery among the Afro-Caribbean population.

Not having the vote or a representative in power, the lower classes used these societies for their mutual, social and economic assistance. To obtain political leverage, the working and employed classes had only two recourses: the general strike and the riot.

From time to time some of these strikes were widespread enough to bring the plight of the masses to the attention of the Colonial Office and forced significant changes in the constitutional order. Such was the case with the Water Riots of Trinidad in 1903, which began as middle-class dissatisfaction over the colonial government's attempt to install water meters and reduce wastage.

Outlined below is the Church's teaching on the role and value of unions to the society.

“The Magisterium recognises the fundamental role played by labour unions, whose existence is connected with the right to form associations or unions to defend the vital interests of workers employed in the various professions.

Unions ‘grew up from the struggle of workers – workers in general but especially the industrial workers – to protect their just rights vis-à-vis the entrepreneurs and the owners of the means of production (*Laborem Exercens*).’

Such organisations, while pursuing their specific purpose with regard to the common good, are a positive influence for social order and solidarity, and are therefore an indispensable element of social life.

The recognition takes place within complex historical and institutional processes, and still today it remains incomplete. This makes the practice of authentic solidarity among workers more fitting and necessary than ever.”

“The Church's social doctrine teaches that relations within the world of work must be marked by cooperation: hatred and attempts to eliminate the other are completely unacceptable. This is also the case because in every social system both ‘labour’ and ‘capital’ represent indispensable components of the process of production.

In light of this understanding, the Church's social doctrine “does not hold that unions are no more than a reflection of the ‘class’ structure of society and that they are a mouthpiece for a class struggle which inevitably governs social life (*Laborem Exercens*)”.

Properly speaking unions are promoters of the struggle for social justice, for the rights of workers in their particular professions: ‘this struggle should not be seen as a normal endeavour ‘for’ the just good ... not a struggle ‘against’ others (*Laborem Exercens*).

Being first of all instruments of solidarity and justice, unions may not misuse the tools of contention; because of what they are called to do, they must overcome the temptation of believing that all workers should be union-members, they must be capable of self-regulation and be able to evaluate the consequences that their decisions will have on the common good (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*).”

“Beyond their function of defending and vindicating, unions have the duty of acting as representatives working for “the proper arrangement of economic life” and of educating the social consciences of workers so that they will feel that they have an active role, according to their proper capacities and aptitudes, in the whole task of economic and social development and in the attainment of the universal common good (*Gaudium et Spes*).

Unions and other forms of labour associations are to work in cooperation with other social entities and are to take an interest in the management of public matters.

Union organisations have the duty to exercise influence in the political arena, making it duly sensitive to labour problems and helping it to work so that workers' rights are respected. Unions

do not, however, have the character of “political parties” struggling for power, and they should not be forced to submit to the decisions of political parties nor be too closely linked to them.

‘In such a situation they easily lose contact with their specific role, which is to secure the just rights of workers within the framework of the common good of the whole of society; instead they become an instrument used for other purposes.’

Next week’s article: New forms of solidarity (how should unions adapt to reflect the changing economic and social conditions).

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