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Labor Day Statement (1971)
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LABOR DAY STATEMENT

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Division for Urban Life
Department of Social Development
United States Catholic Conference
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Introduction

Pope Paul VI, in his recent Apostolic Letter commemorating the eightieth anniversary of Pope Leo XIII's historic social encyclical, *Rerum Novarum* (On the Condition of Labor), pointed out that two aspirations persistently make themselves felt in today's world: "the aspiration to equality and the aspiration to participation." This new emphasis on equality and shared responsibility is not limited to particular countries or particular areas of the world community but, in varying degrees, is characteristic of mankind as a whole. Yet it would probably be fair to say that in certain respects it is a peculiarly American phenomenon. At the very least, it can be said that in no other nation in the world has there been, within recent years, a more widespread and more insistent demand on the part of so many different groups for a greater degree of equality and a fuller measure of participation in the affairs of our society.

What started in our country, less than two decades ago, as a belated demand for elementary forms of justice in the somewhat limited or restricted area of civil rights has rapidly escalated into a much more sweeping demand for genuine equality (as opposed, for example, to so-called lunch-counter or drinking-fountain equality) and for a greater measure of shared responsibility at every level of our society. This demand came, in the first instance, from the largest of our minority groups, the Black community, which historically has suffered beyond measure from an almost total lack of equality in many areas of our national life and from a systematic denial of an adequate sharing in responsibility. More recently, the same demand has come from the Spanish-speaking and also from aggrieved women, alienated university students, and other disaffected groups in our

society. These groups charge that they, too, have yet to be accorded the kind of treatment which they feel they have a right to expect in a nation founded on the principle that all men (and women) are created equal.

Our inability or unwillingness as a nation to cope successfully with this constantly accelerating and completely understandable insistence on a greater measure of equality and for the fullest possible degree of participatory democracy has led us into a dangerous impasse. We no longer seem to know exactly where we want to go as a nation and, to make matters worse, one of our better-known historians has recently notified us all in writing that there really isn't any point in our worrying about it, for the play is over, he reports, and the curtain is about to fall. "The United States," he contends, "is now about to join other nations of the world which were once prepossessing and are now little more than plots of bounded terrain. Like them, the United States will continue to be inhabited by human life; however, Americans will no longer possess that spirit which transforms a people into a citizenry and turns territory into a nation."

This is a dismal thing to prophesy about a nation which, as nations go, is still very young and, in fact, will not be celebrating its bicentennial for another five years. In any event, while most Americans will probably be repelled by this kind of sickly pessimism and despair and will, almost by instinct, tend to reject it, at the same time we will want to examine very carefully the reasons which prompted its author to give expression to it in the first place. His argument is that we have passed the point "where self-interest can subordinate itself to citizenship" or, putting it in reverse, that we have reached the point where "a preoccupation with private concerns deflects (our) population from public obligations."

This, too, may be an exaggeration or an exercise in rhetorical license, but, to the extent that it represents an accurate reading of our present situation in the United States, it raises a number of serious questions which are worth thinking about on the occasion of Labor Day.

The Drive For Equality

Labor Day, with its traditional emphasis on the theme of social justice and the rights of working people, lends itself more readily than any of our

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other national holidays to sober reflection on the two major aspirations which Pope Paul has singled out as characteristic of today's society: the aspiration to equality and the aspiration to participation or shared responsibility. We propose, in this annual Labor Day Statement, to raise a few points for discussion with reference to the first of these two aspirations—the aspirations to equality—but only as it relates to the labor movement itself, and not to the rest of American society. There will be other occasions in the future on which to consider the growing and, on the whole, very encouraging emphasis in today's world on the importance of shared responsibility.

The labor movement, like every other major institution in the United States, is presently on the defensive with regard to its record in promoting genuine color-blind equality. It is being severely criticized in many quarters as a racist institution on the grounds that its stated commitment to racial equality is allegedly being honored more in the breach than in the practice. Much of the criticism directed at organized labor on this particular score is stated very sweepingly and in the most simplistic terms. Within recent weeks, for example, a prominent public official blandly charged, on the public record, that "while some unions have been leaders in equality of opportunity . . . , the majority of unions . . . are still trying to escape with only token compliance with the law of the land."

This is clearly an exaggeration—the kind of sensational exaggeration which makes for catchy headlines but, to our way of thinking, is hardly calculated to advance the cause of racial equality.

It would be closer to the truth to say—as the well known civil rights leader, Bayard Rustin, has recently stated—that the labor movement, for all of its faults and limitations in the area of racial equality, is "the most integrated major institution in American society, certainly more integrated than the corporations, the churches, or the universities."

This is an unpopular thing to say at a time when such a large segment of the so-called liberal community in this country—the group that tends to mold public opinion on matters of this kind—has become completely disenchanted with the labor movement and has written it off almost cynically as an ultra-conservative, not to say reactionary force in American society. Yet it needed to be said, not in

defense of the labor movement itself, which will have to answer for its own mistakes, but in the interest of the truth and in the larger interest of promoting the very cause of racial equality which labor's critics claim to be espousing.

There is no doubt about the fact that some unions, to their shame and discredit and in complete defiance of the principles of justice and equality which they boastfully claim to be guided by, are still practicing racial discrimination or, at best, are still trying "to escape with only token compliance with the law of the land." These unions deserve to be condemned for their hypocrisy and must expect to be held up to public scorn. But to say that "some" unions are guilty of racial discrimination or, at best, are deliberately dragging their feet in the area of racial equality is a far cry from saying that the "majority" of unions fall into this category. To make the latter charge is to play partisan games with the facts and to raise the suspicion that the one making the charge has some purpose in mind other than his stated purpose of promoting equal employment opportunity.

Labor and the Black Community

The trouble with this kind of oversimplified and highly doctrinaire approach to the problem of racial discrimination in the ranks of organized labor—aside from the fact that it happens to be contrary to the evidence—is that it runs the risk of turning the Black community in general and Black workers in particular against the entire American labor movement, and this at the very time when unions are more important to Black workers than ever before. The injustice done to a Black worker who is discriminated against by a particular union is a crime that cries out to heaven for vengeance. Racial injustice of this type is a serious blot on the reputation of the American labor movement. The fact is, however, that the overriding problem for a large percentage of Black workers is not that this or that particular union is discriminating against them or excluding them from membership, but, to the contrary, that they are not eligible to belong to any union for the simple reason that such a large sector of the marginal labor market in which they are forced to compete for employment is unorganized. Mass unemployment or underemployment is obviously an even more serious problem for these disadvantaged workers.

It is fashionable today in certain intellectual circles

and in the so-called "radical chic" community to allege that organized labor is unable or unwilling to face up effectively to these two crucially important problems. Labor is said to have lost the sense of militancy which characterized the movement in the thirties and to have fallen down on the job—or, if you will, given up on the job—of organizing the unorganized. It is also said to be unconcerned about or totally ineffective in fighting for full employment and for a number of related social and economic reforms which are urgently needed if the great mass of Black workers are ever to achieve genuine equality in our society.

As the authors of a major study of the labor movement—Professors Derek C. Bok and John T. Dunlop of Harvard University—have recently pointed out, one must be cautious in evaluating these indiscriminate charges. "In retrospect," they point out, ". . . comparisons with the thirties seem seriously distorted. . . . If anything, (the labor movement) was less concerned then than it is now over social and economic issues outside the range of its own immediate interests. Today, more manpower is being used to lobby for these causes, more space is devoted to them in union periodicals, and more money is being spent to support candidates who favor social reforms than ever was true during the thirties."

Bayard Rustin—who, of all the more prominent civil rights leaders in the United States is by far the most knowledgeable about the labor movement and about labor-management relations—not only agrees with this opinion but takes it a step further. "How ironic," he says, "that in this period when the trade-union movement is thought to be conservative, its social and economic policies are far and away more progressive than those of any other American institution."

This, too, is an unpopular thing to say at the present time, but, again, it needed saying as an antidote to the cynicism of those who—in effect, if not in so many words—are telling Black workers that the labor movement is their enemy and not their friend.

Mr. Rustin thinks—and so does the writer of this Statement—that this kind of advice is a great disservice to the Black working class community. There is reason to think that the majority of Black

workers understand this very well. In any event, Black workers, as Mr. Rustin has pointed out, "have a choice. They can fight to strengthen the trade-union movement by wiping out the vestiges of segregation that remain in it, or they can, knowingly or unknowingly, offer themselves as pawns in the conservatives' games of bust-the-unions." Mr. Rustin's point, however unpopular it may prove to be in many circles, is, in our judgment, very well taken indeed.

But if Black workers have a choice, so does the labor movement. It can either practice what it preaches in the area of racial justice and racial equality—not merely in some of its affiliates, but in all of them, including the most restricted and restrictive crafts—or, by failing to do so, it can bring down upon itself not only the enmity but also, at some point, the hatred of the Black community.

It may be correct to say, as Professors Bok and Dunlop contend, that "greater progress has been made in securing equal opportunity in employment than in any other field of American life. Yet employment is so vital that Negro leaders are understandably impatient. Whether unions can surmount this challenge is a question of profound importance, but the answer remains obscure. With the aid of full employment and more adequate government training programs, the problem may eventually be overcome without great turmoil. On the other hand, rejection of Negro claims may lead to attempts to form Black unions in the ghettos and complete alienation from the labor movement. In this respect, the unions are but a microcosm of the larger problems confronting all of American society."

A Challenge to Organized Labor

This is undoubtedly one of the most serious challenges confronting the labor movement at the present time. The fact that two such objective observers as Bok and Dunlop felt compelled to say that the answer to the question as to whether or not organized labor will be able and willing to surmount the challenge "remains obscure" is a sobering thought on labor's national holiday for the leaders of the movement and also for the rank-and-file. They can take no comfort whatsoever from the thought that, in the field of race relations, "unions are but a microcosm of the larger problems confronting all of American society." That may or may not be true, but, in any event, it is clearly irrelevant. The fact is that, in the

particular case of racial justice, as in many other areas, the public in general and the disadvantaged minorities in particular have a perfect right to expect and demand a higher standard of performance from organized labor than from any other institution in American society, with the exception, if you will, of organized religion. The reason for this is obvious. By definition, and by stated purpose, the labor movement claims to be committed—indeed, it prides itself on being committed—more explicitly and more single-mindedly than other organizations in our society to the cause of justice and equality for working people of every race and color. The labor movement is also committed, or should be committed, more compassionately than other organizations—again, with the exception of organized religion—to the service of the poor. If the Church, as Pope Paul has pointed out in his recent Apostolic Letter, should be characterized by a disinterested will to serve and by “preferential respect” for the poorest of the poor, no less can be expected of the labor movement.

In the American context, preferential respect for the poorest of the poor, a large percentage of whom are Blacks, means, at the very least, an all-out effort on the part of every union in the United States not only to comply with the spirit as well as the letter of the law, but to make up for lost time and make amends for past injustices by going well beyond the technical and even the moral requirements of the law. “Legislation is necessary,” Pope Paul has pointed out in this connection, “but it is not sufficient for setting up true relationships of justice and equality. . . . If beyond legal rules there is really no deeper feeling of respect for and service to others, than even equality before the law can serve as an alibi for flagrant discrimination, continued exploitation and actual contempt.”

In varying degrees, flagrant discrimination, continued exploitation, and actual contempt for Black workers still exist in some but not, as the public official referred to above would have us believe, in the majority of American unions.

It goes without saying, however, that even one such union, large or small, is one too many.

There is still another minority-group of workers in our society who are looking to the labor movement for the fullest possible measure of support in

their belated and very difficult struggle for genuine equality, namely, the Spanish-speaking. Many Spanish-speaking workers, who commonly refer to themselves these days as Chicanos, feel that they have been discriminated against even more than their fellow-workers in the Black community. While comparisons of this type are to be expected, they tend to be rather odious and can easily result in a fruitless form of rivalry. The fact remains, nevertheless, that the social, economic, and political plight of Spanish-surnamed workers in the United States is, in every major respect, just about as bad, and in some areas possibly even worse, than that of their counterparts in the Black community. Reliable statistical evidence, as collated in a recent scholarly study, indicates that "their share of available jobs descends steeply once the line separating white-collar from blue-collar jobs is crossed. There is evidence of a job caste that walls off white-collar jobs from minority workers, and this wall is stouter against Spanish-surnames in areas where their numbers in the population are proportionately greater, as it is for Negroes in those areas where they are a more prominent part of the population."

In the case of the Spanish-speaking, as in the case of Black workers, there are those who, for reasons which are not entirely clear, persist in trying to drive a wedge between the Chicanos and the labor movement. They argue or insinuate that trade unions, almost by definition and of their very nature, generally serve only their present membership and almost always adopt restrictive practices against so-called "outsiders." Again, this is clearly an exaggeration. Some unions admittedly practice discrimination against Chicanos, but, on the basis of all the available evidence, the study referred to above concludes that the pattern of minority employment is better among employers who have arrangements with labor unions that affect to some extent whom they may hire than it is among those who do not have such arrangements.

Here, again, Spanish-speaking workers, like their fellow-workers in the Black community, have a choice to make. In Bayard Rustin's words, as applied in the first instance to Black workers, the Chicanos can either fight to strengthen the trade-union movement by wiping out the vestiges of segregation that remain in it, or they can, knowingly or unknowingly, offer themselves as pawns in the game of bust-the-unions.

Needless to add, the labor movement also has a choice to make—the same choice it is being called upon to make in the case of Black workers. It can either grant complete equality to Spanish-speaking workers or it can expect to bring down upon itself their undying enmity and hatred.

One group of Spanish-speaking workers numbering in the tens of thousands—namely, the farm workers—have already made their choice. They have opted dramatically to work out their economic destiny in and through the labor movement.

Time after time during the past half century farm workers—Chicanos in the main, but Filipinos and Blacks as well—have tried to organize, but their efforts have always been blocked. At long last, however, the tide is beginning to turn in their favor. Within the past few years they have succeeded in organizing what would appear to be a viable union. A number of churchmen of all faiths have strongly supported the patient and remarkably peaceful efforts of these determined farm workers to make up for generations of lost time and, through an organization of their own choosing, to begin to secure their basic human rights. They have a long way to go and many hurdles to surmount, but this time they will not, they cannot, be stopped.

Organized labor is sometimes accused of having done less than it might have done or might have been expected to do in years gone by on behalf of these exploited farm workers. Be that as it may, the labor movement is now beginning to make up for lost time. Its support of the current farm workers' organizational drive, in terms of experienced personnel and financial assistance, is commendable.

Our great farm organizations would also do well to lend their support to this organizational drive, not simply as a matter of justice and fair play, but also a matter of enlightened self-interest. In the long run, the growers have everything to gain and nothing to lose by moving, however belatedly, towards a stable system of labor relations in agriculture based on the kind of labor-management cooperation which has long since become the rule rather than the exception in all of the other major industries in this country.

Conclusion

To conclude these Labor Day reflections on the subject of equality, we note, in the words of Pope Paul VI, that while "progress has already been made

in introducing, in the area of human relationships, greater justice and greater sharing of responsibilities . . . , much remains to be done. Further reflection, research and experimentation must be actively pursued, unless one is to be late in meeting the legitimate aspirations of the workers—aspirations which are being increasingly asserted according as their education, and consciousness of their dignity and the strength of their organizations increase.”

This is a responsibility which belongs to all of us in whatever occupation or profession we may happen to find ourselves. It is our prayerful hope, however, and our confident expectation that the labor movement will take the lead and show us the way to adapt our institutions to the rapidly changing needs of the times. For the sake of the cause which labor is privileged to represent, it cannot afford to be late, nor can the rest of us afford to let it be late, in meeting the legitimate aspirations of workers in general and of the poor in particular for complete equality and for the fullest possible measure of shared responsibility and self-determination—the hallmarks of free men in a free society.

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