

Milwaukee archbishop says hard times don't justify restricting workers' rights

MILWAUKEE – Quoting Popes Benedict XVI and John Paul II, Milwaukee Archbishop Jerome E. ListECKi issued a statement Feb. 16 that came down squarely in favor of workers' rights in the face of efforts by Wisconsin's new governor to restrict those rights.

"Hard times do not nullify the moral obligation each of us has to respect the legitimate rights of workers," Archbishop ListECKi said.

"Every union, like every other economic actor, is called to work for the common good, to make sacrifices when required, and to adjust to new economic realities," he said.

"However, it is equally a mistake to marginalize or dismiss unions as impediments to economic growth."

Archbishop ListECKi was responding to efforts by new Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker, a Republican, to push through measures restricting the rights of unions in a special session of the state legislature.

The bill would strip most government workers – at the state, county and local levels, including teachers – of nearly all collective bargaining rights. The only exceptions would be for police, firefighters and the state patrol. Unions would have to gain approval in a public referendum to seek pay raises higher than the consumer price index.

The legislation would also require union members to vote every year on whether they wanted to continue to be represented by their union, and would forbid unions from forcing employees to pay dues, known as "right to work."

The legislation would require state employees to pay half of their pension costs and

12.6 percent of their health care coverage, moves Walker expects to save the state \$30 million in the short term and up to \$300 million over the next two years. In exchange for the savings, Walker promised no layoffs or furloughs - but threatened to lay off 6,000 workers if the bills failed to pass. Republicans, who hold majorities in both houses of the Legislature, have said they have enough votes to pass the bills.

About 15,000 people rallied Feb. 15 in Madison, the state capital, to protest the planned moves. The protests continued in the following days, as opponents of the measures clogged hallways in the capitol building and jammed legislative hearing rooms. Dozens of schools in Madison closed because of high absence rates.

Archbishop ListECKi noted that Pope Benedict XVI said in his 2009 encyclical "Caritas in Veritate," "The repeated calls issued within the church's social doctrine, beginning with 'Rerum Novarum,' for the promotion of workers' associations that can defend their rights must therefore be honored today even more than in the past."

The archbishop also took note of what Pope John Paul II said in his 1981 encyclical "Laborem Exercens," that a union "remains a constructive factor of social order and solidarity, and it is impossible to ignore it."

"It is especially in times of crisis that new forms of cooperation and open communication become essential," Archbishop ListECKi said. "We request that lawmakers carefully consider the implications of this proposal and evaluate it in terms of its impact on the common good. We also appeal to everyone - lawmakers, citizens, workers and labor unions - to move beyond divisive words and actions and work together, so that Wisconsin can recover in a humane way from the current fiscal crisis."