

# The church and the unions

Judging by the impassioned commentary from some Catholic quarters during recent confrontations between unionized public-sector workers and state governments, you'd think we were back in 1919, with the church defending the rights of wage slaves laboring in sweat shops under draconian working conditions. That would hardly seem to be the circumstances of, say, unionized American public school teachers who make handsome salaries with generous health and pension benefits, work for nine months of the year, and are virtually impossible to fire even if they commit felonies. I don't think those were the kinds of workers Leo XIII had in mind in "Rerum Novarum," or John Paul II in "Laborem Exercens."

The right of workers to organize to advance their interests is not in question. What is in question is the claim of organized government employees to be immunized against the sacrifices necessary to rescue America from fiscal disaster: a disaster created in no small part by irresponsible politicians pandering to public-sector workers' unions. A union that does not defend its own is, of course, an absurdity. A union that defends *only* its own, with no concern for the common good, is something else altogether. That kind of unionized selfishness smacks of organized greed, just like the pyramid schemes of Bernie Madoff and his ilk.

Tens of thousands of inner-city children are being denied a quality education today because of the intransigence of the teachers' unions in conceding the effectiveness – and moral imperative – of voucher programs that allow underprivileged and at-risk kids to get the kind of decent, disciplined education that is unavailable in too many government-run schools: *not* because of lack of funding, and *not* because government schools "have to take everyone," but because of union rules that protect failed teachers, reward incompetence, and make it virtually impossible for dedicated teachers to conduct the kind of classrooms that work. This is selfishness. It ill befits Catholic activists and commentators to support it.

A related moral question is raised by public-sector workers' unions and their recent clashes with governors and legislators determined to prevent their states from going over the fiscal cliff. It's the same moral question that is posed to all of us by the impending crisis of federal entitlements like Social Security and Medicare: what is

our responsibility, in this generation, to future generations?

Is it morally worthy of us to leave our children and grandchildren with mountains of debt because we cannot bring ourselves to reform unsustainable entitlement programs that were enacted when life expectancy was far lower than it is today? Is it morally worthy of today's public-sector workers' unions to defend what one columnist described as "massive promissory notes issued to government unions when state coffers were full and no one was looking"? Is it worthy of citizens of the world's leading democracy to mortgage the country's future security interests and diplomatic options to the fact that the People's Republic of China owns vast amounts of American governmental debt in the form of Treasury bonds - and may well call our financial bluff one day when freedom's cause is on the line?

My family benefited, once, from American trade unionism. My grandfather and uncle were members of the United Steelworkers, back when America had a steel industry. There are many reasons why there's little left of the once-great enterprises for which they worked: the inevitable shifts of comparative advantage in a dynamic global economy are perhaps the most important reasons. But the stupidities of both management and labor in refusing to face the facts of a rapidly changing economic environment also played their role. And the wreckage you see in once-great steel towns across the American Rust Belt bears mute witness to the human suffering that results when people can't see beyond their own immediate and narrow interest.

Rather than acting as if this were 1919, Catholic leaders in America might begin to assert that selfishness is selfishness, with or without a union label, and that the common good requires sacrifices from all.

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