



THE PRIORITY OF LABOUR

A Pastoral Letter from Archbishop Samuel E. Carter, S.J.

Kingston, Jamaica

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TO CELEBRATE the 50th anniversary of Jamaica's Labour Movement, 1988 has been designated, by proclamation of the Governor General, the Year of the Worker. It is an occasion to remember the charism and vision of our National Heroes Marcus Garvey, Alexander Bustamante and Norman Manley, and the thousands who rallied with them to demand for workers their legitimate rights. They initiated a struggle that would eventually lead Jamaica out of colonialism. It is an occasion also to look honestly at the current situation of workers in Jamaica and their hopes for the future, rekindling anew the conviction and dedication that characterized the earlier struggles of our people for the dignity of all who work to build this nation. 1988 also marks the 150th anniversary of the final emancipation from slavery, the scars of which still mark some of our attitudes towards work and the worker.

A CONCERN OF THE CHURCH

2. Since the beginning of industrial capitalism, the Catholic Church has expressed its concern for the situation of industrial workers and has developed a rich body of teaching regarding their rights and responsibilities. Beginning with *ON THE CONDITION OF THE WORKER (Rerum Novarum)* in 1891 and culminating in Pope John Paul II's encyclical letters *ON HUMAN WORK (Laborem Exercens)* in 1981 and *CONCERN FOR THE SOCIAL ORDER (Sollicitudo Rei Socialis)* in 1987, the rights of workers in their struggle for justice have become an integral part of Catholic moral teaching. Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world have come to be understood not as something peripheral to the preaching of the Gospel, but, in the words of the Third International Synod of Bishops held in Rome in 1971, a "constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel."¹ "The Church is firmly committed to this cause, for it considers it to be its mission, its service, a proof of its fidelity to Christ."²

BIBLICAL ROOTS

3. The teaching of the Church on the dignity of work is first of all rooted in the Biblical revelation of God's saving action



in history. In the story of creation we are told that God created man and woman in His own image and likeness, blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and conquer it. Be masters of the fish of the sea, the birds of heaven and all living animals on the earth." (Genesis 1:28) From the beginning, God's work of creation was to continue through human labour.

4. In continuing that process, work would bring dignity to the worker and at the same time build a community of people, serving one another's needs for food, clothing, shelter, cultural and intellectual development, all of which would enhance, nourish and promote the dignity of the worker. When His people began to be exploited and oppressed in Egypt where "the Egyptians

forced the sons of Israel into slavery and made their lives unbearable with hard labour, work with clay and brick, all kinds of work in the fields." (Exodus 1:14) God not only saw their plight, but showed His love in liberating His people from oppression. "I have seen the miserable state of my people in Egypt. I have heard their cry to be free . . . and I mean to deliver them." (Exodus 3: 7-8)

The Year of the Worker — an occasion to look honestly at the current situation of workers in Jamaica and their hopes for the future.

5. Repeatedly, in sacred history, God sent His prophets to espouse the cause of workers whose labour was exploited. Through Isaiah God expressed his anger at those who pretended to lead religious lives while taking advantage of their workers:

Look, you do business on your fast days, you oppress all your workmen . . . Fasting like yours today will never make your voice heard on high. Is that the sort of fast that pleases me, a truly penitential day for me? Hanging your head like a reed, lying down on sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call fasting, a day acceptable to Yahweh? Is not this the sort of fast that pleases me — it is the Lord Yahweh who sneaks — to break every yoke, to share your bread with the hungry, and shelter the homeless poor . . . (Isaiah 58:4-7)

In Ezekiel, God, the Good Shepherd, takes up the cause of those who have been shunted aside and cheated and pledges to come to their rescue:

As for you, my sheep, the Lord Yahweh says this: I will judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and he-goats. Not content to graze in good pastures, you trample down the rest; not content to drink clear water, you muddy the rest with your feet. And my sheep must graze on what your feet have trampled, drink what your feet have muddied. Very well then, the Lord Yahweh says this: I myself am now about to judge between fat sheep and lean sheep. Since you have butted all the weak sheep with your rumps and shoulders and horns, until you have chased them away, I am going to come and rescue my sheep from being cheated; I will judge between sheep and sheep. (Ezekiel 34:17-22)





THE MISSION OF JESUS

6. Finally, Jesus proclaimed His mission "to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to the captives and to the blind new sight, to set the downtrodden free, to proclaim the Lord's year of favour." (Luke 4:18-19). The Lord's "year of favour" was God's Jubilee year of the Old Law (Leviticus 25:10), every fiftieth year, when land was to be redistributed so that each might have equal opportunity to own, to work and to produce. Jesus, guided by Joseph and Mary, himself became a worker, identifying with the working world, recognizing the dignity of human labour. (Mark 6:2-3; Matthew 13:55). In choosing his disciples, Jesus showed his confidence in manual workers, selecting fishermen, Peter, Andrew, James and John (Matthew 4:18-22) as his first four disciples.

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THE CONDITION OF WORKERS IN JAMAICA TODAY

7. As we celebrate this 50th anniversary of the Labour Movement in Jamaica, we should appreciate and give thanks for its achievements. Workers' rights have gained some measure of protection in law, strong unions have benefitted thousands of workers, and society has come, for the most part, to accept and defend workers' right to organize. In many instances there have been improvements in working conditions with the introduction of the forty hour work week, pension benefits, maternity leave, health insurance coverage, job security and a minimum wage.

8. We are only too aware, however, that that struggle begun fifty years ago has not ended. In fact some of the gains achieved now appear to be threatened:

- The real purchasing power of wages declined by 82.3% between 1978 and 1985.³

- There has been a tragic fall in the Social Wage (government expenditure on social services, housing, education, health care, etc.) from \$63.69 per person in 1981-82 to \$51.58 in 1982-83; \$22.41 in 1983-84; and \$13.50 in 1984-85.⁴

- Legislation, such as the Fire Brigade Act, has reduced rather than enhanced the rights of workers.

- Unemployment, while showing some recent decline from a chronically high 25%, still remains at 21%, more than one in five in the workforce.⁵

- Workers in the Free Zone and 807 industries, very often young women earning low wages in garment factories, cannot exercise their right in organize trade unions because of fear of being fired.

- A recent study shows that more than nine out of ten workers do not believe that they get a fair deal from employers, two out of three think that they are paid less than they deserve, and approximately half are dissatisfied with the work that the trade unions have been doing for the workers of this country.⁶

WORLDWIDE PROBLEM

9. This current decline in benefit and rights of workers is not a uniquely Jamaican phenomenon. Workers in other Third World countries have seen their income fall drastically in recent years, while workers in the first world have witnessed the loss of thousands of jobs as a result of advances in technology and of the relocation of factories to the third world in search of cheap labour. At the same time, the conditions of workers in communist countries have been subject to many of the same pressures, most dramatically highlighted in the action of Poland's Solidarity Union.

"Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel."

1971 World Synod of Bishops

THE EFFECT ON PERSONAL AND FAMILY LIFE

10. The true impact of these conditions on personal and family life cannot be adequately expressed by statistics, data and numbers. In Jamaica, more than one out of five workers, created in the image and likeness of God, are denied work. Their sense of worth is damaged, ambition extinguished, and hope for a decent and productive life frustrated. Of those who have work, almost 50% receive wages that leave them in poverty, insufficient to support themselves and their families.⁷ The resulting anger and bitterness cannot but aggravate our high level of crime and violence, including domestic violence, in which women and children are victims of socio-economically induced aggression.

11. When a worker, even by long hours of tedious labour, cannot earn enough to feed and clothe his or her children, send them to school, and provide no better than miserable and sub-human housing, not only is that person's human dignity violated, and their worth as providers destroyed, but family life, the basic structure of society, suffers disastrous damage. Men who cannot find dignity in work are tempted to father more children; women whose wages are insufficient to support themselves or their children are driven to find partners primarily for economic motives. Children are the most innocent and vulnerable victims of the physical and emotional violence of these situations, often resulting from unjustly low wages and the denial of basic rights of workers.



PRINCIPLES OF CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

12. Scripture and the teaching of the Church provide us with five fundamental principles that help us to understand and respond to the problems and struggles, the hopes and aspirations of the worker. These include:

- (1) the primacy of the person;
- (2) the equitable distribution of the world's goods;
- (3) the preferential option for the poor;
- (4) the Gospel character of the struggle for justice; and
- (5) the priority of labour.

PEOPLE COME FIRST

13. Persons do not exist for the service and development of the economy; rather, the economy is to serve the basic and essential needs of persons and of all persons.⁸ Economic laws are not absolute, but only describe what happens as a result of certain choices made by those who exercise control



over capital, labour and the mechanism by which economic benefits will be distributed to different members of society. These basic choices which govern the manner in which the economy is organized must be in the interest of all the people in the society, not in the primary interests of the richest few who control most of the accumulated wealth of the nation.

EQUITABLE DISTRIBUTION

14. "God intended the earth and all that it contains for the use of every human being and people . . . The right to have a share of earthly goods sufficient for oneself and one's family belongs to everyone."⁹ Private ownership, which is strongly defended in Church teaching, is but a means to better stewardship of the goods of creation, their development and distribution. According to Pope John Paul II, in his 1981 encyclical letter ON HUMAN WORK:

Christian tradition has never upheld this right (the right to private property) as absolute and untouchable. On the contrary, it has always understood this right within the broader context of the right common to all to use the goods of the whole of creation. The right to private property is subordinated to the right of common use, to the fact that goods are meant for everyone.¹⁰

"This principle strikes radically at the foundation of economic liberalism in national economies and at the current practices of international trade, in which the north exploits the south, and the rich and powerful exploit the poor."¹¹ This is not to question the accumulation of savings and capital necessary for economic growth, but rather to insist that the income which is distributed should be distributed to all who produce so as to satisfy the fundamental needs of all for adequate food, shelter, health care and education. "All other rights, including those of property and free commerce, are to be subordinated to this principle."¹²

PREFERENCE FOR THE POOR

15. Given the grave inequalities that characterize the distribution of wealth, both between nations and within particular countries, the Church has chosen to affirm a preferential option for the poor. In the words of Pope John Paul II:

You know that the preferential option for the poor . . . is not an invitation to exclusivism, . . . but a call to special solidarity with the humble and weak, the suffering and weeping, humiliated and left on the fringes of life and society, in order to help them realize ever more fully their own dignity as human persons and children of God.¹³

This preferential option for the poor is a call to all to engage in the struggle for justice, but with a particular emphasis and dedication to the rights and the needs of the majority in our society and our world who do not have a humanly adequate share in the economic benefits of society.



STRUGGLE FOR JUSTICE

16. The struggle for justice, to which we are called, is not something that is peripheral or marginal to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, but an indispensable part, a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel. The 1971 World Synod of Bishops articulated this principle:

Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or — in other words — of the church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation.¹⁴

This inseparability of work for social justice from the preaching of the Gospel was affirmed by Pope John Paul II in addressing the Latin American bishops gathered at Puebla, Mexico, in 1979:

If the Church is involved in defending or promoting human dignity, it does so in accordance with her mission . . . She has learned that an indispensable part of her evangelizing mission is made up of works on behalf of justice and human promotion.¹⁵

No sincere Christian can refuse concern for or involvement in the struggle for justice and human dignity.¹⁶

Repeatedly in sacred history God sent His prophets to espouse the cause of workers whose labour was exploited.

PRIORITY OF LABOUR

17. Finally, the application of the preceding principles to the situation of the worker serves as the basis for the principle of the priority of labour over capital.¹⁷ Labour, not capital, according to Pope John Paul II, must be given priority in the development of an economy based on justice.

Isolating (the means of production) as a separate property in order to set it up in the form of "capital" in opposition to "labour" — and thus to practice exploitation of labour — is contrary to the very nature of these means of production and their possession. They cannot be possessed against labour, they cannot even be possessed for possession's sake, because the only legitimate title to their possession — whether in the form of private ownership or in the form of public or collective ownership — is that they should serve labour and thus by serving labour that they should make possible the achievement of the first principle of this order, namely the universal destination of goods and the right of common use of them.¹⁸

Human labour should not be treated as a commodity to be simply bought and sold in the market place. On the contrary, human labour takes precedence over both capital and technology in the production process.

THE RIGHTS OF WORKERS

18. Drawing on these principles of social morality, certain fundamental rights for workers have become an accepted part of the teaching of the Church. They include:

- (1) the right of workers to have work;
- (2) the right to a just wage;
- (3) the right of workers to organize trade unions;
- (4) the right to strike, when it is a necessary last resort to achieve justice; and
- (5) the right of workers to participate in the decision making of the workplace.

RIGHT TO WORK

19. Each and every person capable of work and willing to work has a right to gainful employment. It is through work that people earn their daily bread and through work that people must "subdue the earth" to fulfill God's mandate in creation. A socio-economic order which is chronically unable or unwilling to provide full employment violates this basic human right and is a social evil. It has no morally defensible existence and must be changed.

RIGHT TO A JUST WAGE

20. Every worker has a right to a just wage, a wage sufficient to sustain one's self and one's dependents. This just wage must be sufficient to provide for the basic necessities of life — food, shelter, education, health care and adequate cultural and recreational activities. In 1985 the average wage in Jamaica was \$87.00 per week while the average cost of food necessary for basic nutrition for two adults and three children was \$214.00 per week.¹⁹ Even if households had two average incomes they would fall below the income level required for basic nutrition. It is a sinful situation, a social sin, that so many lack basic necessities while others live in affluence.

RIGHT TO ORGANIZE

21. Workers have a right of association, a right to organize to defend and promote their interests. The Church's social teaching maintains that any attempt to deny workers the right to organize and to bargain collectively or to prevent them from organizing by any law, pressure, intimidation or threat, is an attack on human freedom and dignity itself. Workers should be afforded every opportunity and encouragement to organize trade unions so that they might effectively work together and with management to better their situation through the increased productivity that cooperation would promote.



22. The right to strike is "recognized by Catholic social teaching as legitimate in the proper conditions and within just limits."²⁰ Workers should be secure in their right to strike, without fear of any penalty for taking part in a legitimate strike. At the same time, the strike must be seen as an extreme means, a last resort, and if essential community services are involved, the common good demands that some guarantee be made for their provision.



RIGHT TO PARTICIPATE

23. Finally, workers have not only the right to organize trade unions or associations, but also to participate in the decision making of the workplace. In the words of Pope John XXIII:

We regard as justifiable the desire of employees to be partners in enterprises with which they are associated or wherein they work . . . employees should have an active part in the affairs of the enterprise, whether this be public or private . . . it by no means follows that those who work daily in such an enterprise are to be considered merely as servants, whose sole function is to execute orders silently, and who are not allowed to interject their desires and interests, but must conduct themselves as idle standbys when it comes to the assignment and direction of their tasks.²¹

This right of worker participation is emphasised and exemplified by Pope John Paul II, in his advocacy of the "socialization" of capital, i.e. the means of production.²² Socialization of capital is not simply the taking over of capital (the means of production) by the state, but rather the effective participation of the workers. A genuine socialization or humanization of working conditions can only take place when employees (a much wider category than manual workers) are associated as far as possible with the ownership of capital. This goal will only be ensured "when on the basis of his or her work each person is fully entitled to consider his/herself a part owner of the great workbench at which he/she is working with everyone else."²³

RESPONSIBILITIES OF WORKERS

24. Workers enjoy not only rights, but responsibilities as well. The long history of slavery that demeaned physical work and current practices of exploitation which prompt workers to feel justified in doing the minimum and increasing compensation by theft, sour and corrupt the relationships of the workplace. Indiscriminate or wildcat strikes in the past, particularly in essential services, have undermined public support for worker's rights. Breaking this cycle of mistrust and alienation is the responsibility of capital and labour, employers and employees, management and unions. Workers must realize that laziness and theft, however natural a response when wages are insufficient to provide for the basic necessities of life, sabotage the development of better relations in the workplace. Without scrupulous honesty and dedicated hard work, productivity, from which ultimately the benefits of workers are derived, will be low, employment precarious and prosperity impossible.



25. The responsibility of workers extends also to selfless collaboration in the development of strong organizations to represent their interests. Workers have an obligation to be active in their unions by participating in meetings, standing for office and volunteering their time in the services of their unions. Labour leaders must put the interest of workers before their own personal interests or the interests of partisan politics. Unions should not limit their concern only to their own members, but should make their expertise available to unorganized workers as well as to the disadvantaged, unemployed, handicapped and the elderly. As the labour movement sparked the process of emancipation from colonialism, it is vital that today it play its full role in shaping a society of justice and compassion for all.

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CONCLUSION

26. The social teaching of the Church, rooted in revelation and affirmed in the teaching of Jesus, provides general principles and enunciates particular rights and responsibilities of workers. God's response to His people in the bondage of servile labour in Egypt, Jesus' statement of His mission as bringing good news to the poor, sight to the blind, liberty for the oppressed (Luke 4:18), must surely make it clear that our response to injustice to workers, to any man or woman, is not something peripheral to God's plan, but an integral part of salvation history. Christians, no less than Moses and Aaron, Isaiah and Amos, and Jesus himself, are missioned to participate in the betterment of conditions for the worker. It was precisely their effective response to these needs that made Marcus Garvey, Alexander Bustamante and Norman Manley national heroes. While it is workers themselves who must be the first champions of their rights,

"If the Church is involved in defending or promoting human dignity, it does so in accordance with her mission."

Pope John Paul II.

their struggle is but part of the larger struggle for a just society that each of us is called to build. The state, government, the Church, the private sector — large and small, all have a responsibility in building a society in which the priority of labour, the dignity of the person, the just distribution of wealth and income are not only ideals, but in fact describe life in Jamaica. May our response, nourished and sustained by faith, move us to pursue this goal and bring it to fulfillment.



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