

Why Unions Should Matter To People of Faith by Rev. Rebekah Jordan

“Unions have nothing to do with Jesus Christ.” This statement was muttered to me by a seminary student who had picked up a flyer about a summer internship program where seminarians work with labor unions to advance workers’ rights. The tone in his voice implied unions were the antithesis of Jesus Christ. While many people of faith may not share this future pastor’s disdain for unions, they still wonder what the connection is between faith, justice and the often unfamiliar world of organized labor.

I believe this uncertainty often stems from an incomplete understanding of why workers decide to organize unions in the first place. Often people assume that a pay raise is the main reason workers choose unions. Unions do improve workers’ pay, with unionized workers making 30 percent more than non-union workers in similar jobs. Pay improvements for women, African-American, and Latino workers in unions are even greater.

This track record of success in raising workers up to a living wage and beyond is one reason that people of faith who care about workers cannot ignore unions.

But wages are only one part of the story. During my eight years in worker justice ministry, I’ve had the chance to talk with workers from at least nine different union organizing drives. These workers ranged from farm workers to forklift drivers to nurses. More often than not, when I asked them why they wanted a union, the first reason they gave was not wages. A lack of a voice in the workplace decisions that affect their lives, and inconsistent disciplinary action against employees are two of the reasons I’ve heard most frequently from workers about why they organize.

Nurses and healthcare workers have told me they want a forum where they

can speak for their patients as well as themselves. Warehouse workers wanted consistent rules to be put into place, and for consequences for breaking those rules to be evenly applied to all workers, whether their supervisors like the worker or not.

Another area where unions make a difference for workers is in safer working conditions, whether the issue is preventing pesticide poisoning or providing well-maintained equipment that doesn’t endanger workers’ lives. Health care and pension benefits as well as paid sick leave and vacation are other benefits that union contracts often provide for.

In our nation’s history, it is unions that have most often allowed poor and working class people to be paid wages and benefits that can sustain their families, and to work in a safe and respectful environment. For this reason alone, people of faith and labor unions should work together. Although we come from different places, we hold a common concern of justice for workers who are often forgotten or left behind by the rest of society.

Having a collective voice through their unions is the most common way that workers have been able to win concrete victories in their particular workplaces. But to have that collective voice, workers must first establish unions, and that is becoming increasingly difficult for American workers. Analysis of National Labor Relations Board data by Kate Brofenbrenner of Cornell University found that during union organizing drives, 91 percent of workers are required to attend mandatory meetings where their employer tells them that unions are bad and gives them reasons to vote against the union. Each year, over 10,000 workers are illegally fired for exercising their right to organize.

It is usually when workers are facing this combination of high pressure (and



often illegal) tactics that they and their unions seek the help of the faith community. In every campaign that Mid-South Interfaith Network has supported workers’ rights to establish a union, at least one outspoken union supporter has been fired. Many times, multiple workers were fired in an attempt to frighten workers into voting against a union.

When employers attempt to silence the voices of their workers, the role of the Mid-South Interfaith Network is to try to create a space for workers’ voices to be heard, by their employer and by the community. That way, workers can decide for themselves whether union representation is the right decision for their workplace, without fear of harassment or of losing their livelihood.

Our sacred traditions teach that human beings were created by God with dignity. This dignity is to be treasured and respected in all places, including our workplaces.

The dignity of workers is upheld by their employers when workplaces are safe, fair, and provide sustainable wages and benefits, **and** when employers listen to and respect the voices of their workers. While we may not be able to agree on everything, on these two principles I believe that people of faith and unions are on common ground, and we have common work to share.