

# The moral dimension – justice for workers: moral not a weasel

**Bruce Duncan** CSsR

Fr Bob McGuire hosted a public forum on the new industrial legislation at the Melbourne Town Hall on 7 June, with about 400 people from community, church and trade union groups attending.

Speakers from the trade unions were Brian Boyd, secretary of the Victoria Trades Hall Council, and Chris Walton, assistant secretary of the ACTU. From the church and community groups, speakers included Maureen Postma (General Secretary, Victorian Council of Churches), Rev David Pargeter, (Uniting Church Commission for Mission), Rev Canon Ray Cleary (Anglicare Victoria), and Sally James (Melbourne City Mission). Fr Bruce Duncan reviewed fundamental moral issues raised by the legislation.

Talking about the moral dimension of industrial legislation should not be seen as a superficial nod to piety or convention. 'Moral' is not a 'weasel' word. Moral here means nothing less than what makes for human flourishing, for working people to come to their full stature as responsible human beings.

It means people living with dignity, with the opportunity to develop their skills, talents and relationships. It means people actively directing their lives and participating in the processes and conversations that build a society and a culture. It means providing all our citizens with a reasonable equality of opportunity, with good education, housing, healthcare and services.

I speak out of the Catholic social tradition, but in solidarity with other religious traditions, with labour and social reform movements over many years. The struggle for social justice is never finished, to organise the institutions and foster the values in society that will produce the most widespread flourishing of human wellbeing. That is what social morality is all about: encouraging such human flourishing.

How is this to happen? The basic moral criteria were laid out 115 years ago in Pope Leo XIII's document, *On the Condition of the Working Class*, which influenced Mr Justice Higgins in his Harvester Judgment of 1907.

Leo denied that employers need only pay a subsistence wage. He insisted that there were objective criteria governing the wage contract:

1. The wage had to be sufficient adequately to support workers and their families in modest comfort, allowing them to save against sickness and old age, and provide economic security. Indeed Pope John Paul II added that the justice of an entire economy could be judged by how fair were wages.

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2. Leo continued that there had to be freedom and a degree of equity in the bargaining relationship between employer and employee, otherwise workers would be victims of duress or intimidation.

3. To help restore equity in the bargaining relationship, Leo supported the right to form trade unions and to bargain collectively. In the words of Pope John Paul again, unions were 'indispensable' and an essential voice for workers in the struggle for social justice.

4. Leo insisted that the right to property was not meant to be concentrated in the hands of the rich, but should be more equitably and widely spread. Hence the churches have strongly supported efforts for workers to own their own homes, and to share in the ownership and management of their firms and workplaces.

5. Finally, according to Pope Leo, the state and society must establish adequate measures of regulation to ensure that the economy operates justly and sustains the living standards not just of workers but of disadvantaged groups as well.

Pope Leo would be astonished to see today these principles challenged, and at a time of unparalleled economic prosperity. He would be appalled to see being contested

- the right of workers to bargain collectively and for unions to represent their members;
- the right of employees to a wage adequate to support them and their families in reasonable comfort and security;
- the existence of

independent institutions of arbitration and conciliation, and

- the right to strike in extreme circumstances. Pope John Paul added that workers should not be exposed to personal penal sanctions for going on strike.

According to these moral principles, long articulated by religious and labour thinkers, it would clearly be unjust

- to force down wages and entitlements, especially of the more vulnerable and lowly paid in the community, and
- to destroy the framework of institutions that protect the living standards of employees.

Australia was once admired for its social equity and advanced working conditions. It could be so again, but not if we abandon the moral foundations necessary in a just economy and society. **m**

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