

Latter-day Saints *and* Justice for Workers



LATTER-DAY SAINTS AND JUSTICE FOR WORKERS

LDS scripture attests to the importance God places on caring for the poor, thereby supporting families and communities. Because of the practical nature of their faith, Latter-day Saints have a history of organizing to seek solutions to temporal needs.

GOD CARES FOR THE POOR

Latter-day Saints believe that strong families are vital for the well being of individuals and of society. “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” teaches “the family is central to the Creator’s plan for the eternal destiny of His children.” Economically insecure families are more likely to have the problems that affect how well a family functions – divorce, addiction, verbal and physical abuse, and so on.

LDS scripture contains strongly worded warnings to those who do not take care of the poor and needy (Alma 5:55-56; Mormon 8:35-39; D&C 104:18). In the scriptures, caring for the poor is not just a question of charity; it is a question of justice. As King Benjamin explains in the Book of Mormon, nothing we have is really ours. It is given to us as a sacred trust – a stewardship – to be used for the benefit of our fellow beings.

And also, ye yourselves will succor those that stand in need of succor; ye will administer of your substance unto him that standeth in need; and ye will not suffer that the beggar putteth up his petition to you in vain, and turn him out to perish.

Perhaps thou shalt say: The man has brought upon himself his misery; therefore I will stay my hand, and will not give unto him of my food, nor impart unto him of my substance that he may not suffer, for his

punishments are just –

But I say unto you, O man, whosoever doeth this the same hath great cause to repent; and except he repenteth of that which he hath done he perisheth forever, and hath no interest in the kingdom of God.

For behold, are we not all beggars? Do we not all depend upon the same Being, even God, for all the substance which we have...? (Mosiah 4:16-19)

LDS scholar Hugh Nibley has written at length on scriptural teachings about justice for the poor. In the Lord's justice, Dr. Nibley observes, "everyone has a right to whatever he needs to live on" (487). The Lord therefore commands his people to be generous to the disadvantaged, including widows, orphans, debtors, immigrants, and laborers.

I will come near to you to judgment; and I will be a swift witness...against those that oppress the hireling in his wages, the widow and the fatherless, and that turn aside the stranger, and fear not me, saith the Lord of Hosts. (Malachi 3:5; 3 Nephi 24:5)

LATTER-DAY SAINTS AND UNIONS

Revelations received by Joseph Smith commanded the Saints to be "equal in earthly things" (D&C 78:6; see also D&C 49:20; 51:9; 70:14). In early LDS communities, families pooled together their property and then received back only what they needed to live. Excess food, income, or possessions were placed in a common storehouse, to be distributed to those in need. Because of struggles within the LDS community and conflicts with non-LDS neighbors, the Saints discontinued this system. But stewardship, union, and equality remained key LDS values.

Another way in which the early Saints tried to achieve greater economic equality was creating craft guilds and unions. One revelation to Joseph Smith

commanded LDS workers to “organize themselves” for the purpose of building a community house (D&C 124:62-63). In Nauvoo, Joseph Smith approved the creation of a spinners and consumers cooperative to provide employment and help decrease the price of goods (Davies, Deseret’s Sons 33).

Later, in pioneer Utah, the Typographical Association of Deseret was formed to encourage moral behavior in workers, to arbitrate between workers and leaders, and to promote the development of industry. This organization was the first known labor union in Utah. Its members included William W. Phelps, Orson Pratt, George Q. Cannon, and future prophet Wilford Woodruff. Brigham Young prayed at the organization’s first meeting, in 1852 (Davies, Deseret’s Sons 37-38; “Utah Labor” 204).

Church leaders were often wary of outside labor unions, and they spoke against certain goals and tactics of unions that they deemed unjust. At the same time, they recognized how important it was that



workers organize to secure just pay and working conditions. "There can be no objections to a firm and persistent contention for the right of labor," President Joseph F. Smith insisted, "if the contention is maintained in the spirit of reason and fairness" (415). Presidents Heber J. Grant and David O. McKay later made similar statements.

J. Reuben Clark, a counselor in the First Presidency, had this to say about the injustices workers often confronted:

I have not approved and do not approve of capital's weapons – the blacklist, lockouts, and grinding out the maximum returns for the minimum of wage outlay, even the imposition of starvation wages, that too often have been capital's means for dealing with labor in the past. These have worked great injustices that must not be repeated. (quoted in Tullis 241)

Unions played a chief role in overcoming the injustices President Clark spoke of. They helped secure just wages and safe working conditions for Utah miners and railroad workers, among others.



For over 150 years, the labor movement has included Latter-day Saints who see unions as a means to improve the welfare of families and communities.

WHY UNIONS ARE IMPORTANT

“I believe the Lord does not wish to see His people condemned to live in poverty,” President Gordon B. Hinckley has said (53). Many factors keep people in poverty. But one of the most obvious reasons poor people stay poor is that they do not have, in the words of Howard W. Hunter, “remunerative employment” – meaning, employment that “provides enough income so that we may be self-sufficient and able to support our families” (122).

Often, both parents in poor families must perform degrading work for long hours to keep their children housed, clothed, and fed. These parents barely have time to see their children – or each other. Clearly, such a situation is not conducive to the family’s temporal or spiritual well-being. This in turn has negative consequences for the well-being of the community.

Obtaining remunerative employment is key to overcoming poverty. This principle is at the heart of LDS efforts to aid the poor. For example, the recently created Perpetual Education Fund finances the education of returned missionaries in poor countries, so they can obtain jobs that adequately provide for their families.

Forming or joining a union is one of the most effective ways for workers to ensure that their employment is remunerative and safe. Through unions, workers can negotiate for improved wages, benefits, and working conditions, as a first step toward overcoming poverty. The following statement from a 1903 General Conference address by B. H. Roberts is as true today as it was a century ago:

[T]he hosts of men that are engaged in the several trades have found it necessary in some way or other to protect themselves, that they may command a reasonable price for that labor...[W]hatever the excesses may be, and however much we may regret them, nevertheless organization and union on the part of labor became an absolute necessity to the working masses. (97)

Unions, like all human institutions, are imperfect. Nevertheless, unions are an important tool for challenging injustice in the workplace, securing adequate wages for workers, and thus improving conditions for families and communities. Unions can be a powerful instrument “to plead the cause of the poor and the needy” (D&C 124:75).

*My position as the Utah AFL-CIO Community Services Liaison gives me the opportunity to fulfill both my union and religious obligations. As a Liaison, I'm helping workers with health, personal, and financial problems. Humanitarianism has always been a major part of labor's agenda. "When ye are in the service of your fellow beings ye are only in the service of your God" (Mosiah 2:17). Service to others is an important commitment to me, because of my labor family and church.
—Michael Lester*

Throughout the nation, unions are joining with faith groups, creating partnerships to strengthen and enrich people's lives at home and on the job. It has been said that the true measure of a people is what it does for the least of its members, not the status of its greatest members. Given the teachings of LDS scripture, the Saints' commitment to family and community, and their history of organized efforts on behalf of workers and the poor, Latter-day Saints may want to explore ways of working with the labor movement

to help create a more just and equitable society

For more information about building partnerships between the religious community and the labor communities, contact:

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