

WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

EYE ON THE CAPITOL

August 25, 2011

WE CELEBRATE LABOR DAY FOR VERY GOOD REASONS

By John Huebscher, Executive Director

Years ago, when we were packing for one of our family vacations I asked my mother where she went for vacations when she was a little girl. “We didn’t take vacations when I was little,” she said. “Your grandfather worked for a railroad and if he wanted a day off they would give his job to someone else.” She paused a moment and said, “Later when the union came we got to take vacations.”

I think of that moment from time to time, usually around Labor Day. It’s useful to recall that what many of us enjoy today is the result of victories won by others years ago. In the context of the workplace this means things like paid vacations, 40 hour work week that allowed workers to have a family life, living wages, health insurance, workers’ compensation and pensions.

Those things were beyond the reach of most Americans in my grandfather’s time. They exist today because his generation won some pretty heated battles at the ballot box and in the market place to make them a reality. A vital early battle was over the right of workers to form unions.

It seems odd that this would be a controversial proposition. But it was. Workers had to contend with the notion that unions denied workers the right to freely negotiate their working conditions. Of course, my grandfather knew that the railroad was much freer than he was to set the rules of the negotiation. But by banding together he and his co-workers enjoyed the equal footing needed to win more just working conditions.

The Catholic Church understood this sooner than many. Writing in 1891 in his encyclical letter *Rerum Novarum*, Pope Leo XIII affirmed the right of workers to form associations to protect their interests. Subsequent popes have reaffirmed that value of unions and the rights of labor. Generations of priests stood with workers at union meetings and on picket lines. For decades the bishops of the United States, acting through the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, have marked Labor Day with a statement of their own.

This is not to say that unions are always right in every argument or that every demand is just. For Pope Leo also noted that workers should “press their claims with reason.” Moreover, the demands of labor must always be assessed in light of their impact on the common good.

That said, it is no accident that the economic health and strength of American society coincided with the growth of the labor movement. Nor is it an accident that the difficulties of our nation’s middle class have also coincided with the decline in union membership.

Someone once observed that all of us drink water from wells we did not dig and are warmed by fires we did not start. Those of us who enjoy paid vacations and holidays, weekends to ourselves, health insurance, and retirement plans are warmed by such fires.

Labor Day is the occasion to remember, with thanks, those who started those fires.

Even if we don't belong to unions, we are the richer for their many contributions to American life. It is also fitting that we observe a holiday to recall their many contributions to the lives we enjoy today.

-30-