

PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE

**COMPENDIUM
OF THE SOCIAL DOCTRINE
OF THE CHURCH**

***TO HIS HOLINESS POPE JOHN PAUL II
MASTER OF SOCIAL DOCTRINE AND
EVANGELICAL WITNESS
TO JUSTICE AND PEACE***

Vatican City, 2 April 2004, Memorial of Saint Francis of Paola.

CHAPTER SIX

V. THE RIGHTS OF WORKERS

a. The dignity of workers and the respect for their rights

301. *The rights of workers, like all other rights, are based on the nature of the human person and on his transcendent dignity.* The Church's social Magisterium has seen fit to list some of these rights, in the hope that they will be recognized in juridical systems: the right to a just wage; [651] the right to rest; [652] the right “to a working environment and to manufacturing processes which are not harmful to the workers' physical health or to their moral integrity”; [653] the right that one's personality in the workplace should be safeguarded “without suffering any affront to one's conscience or personal dignity”; [654] the right to appropriate subsidies that are necessary for the subsistence of unemployed workers and their families; [655] the right to a pension and to insurance for old age, sickness, and in case of work-related accidents; [656] the right to social security connected with maternity; [657] the right to assemble and form associations.[658] These rights are often infringed, as is confirmed by the sad fact of workers who are underpaid and without protection or adequate representation. It often happens that work conditions for men, women and children, especially in developing countries, are so inhumane that they are an offence to their dignity and compromise their health.

b. The right to fair remuneration and income distribution

302. *Remuneration is the most important means for achieving justice in work relationships.*[659] The “just wage is the legitimate fruit of work”.[660]

They commit grave injustice who refuse to pay a just wage or who do not give it in due time and in proportion to the work done (cf. *Lv* 19:13; *Dt* 24:14-15; *Jas* 5:4). A salary is the instrument that permits the labourer to gain access to the goods of the earth. “Remuneration for labour is to

be such that man may be furnished the means to cultivate worthily his own material, social, cultural, and spiritual life and that of his dependents, in view of the function and productiveness of each one, the conditions of the factory or workshop, and the common good”.[661] The simple agreement between employee and employer with regard to the amount of pay to be received is not sufficient for the agreed-upon salary to qualify as a “just wage”, because a just wage “must not be below the level of subsistence”[662] of the worker: natural justice precedes and is above the freedom of the contract.

303. *The economic well-being of a country is not measured exclusively by the quantity of goods it produces but also by taking into account the manner in which they are produced and the level of equity in the distribution of income*, which should allow everyone access to what is necessary for their personal development and perfection. An equitable distribution of income is to be sought on the basis of criteria not merely of commutative justice but also of social justice that is, considering, beyond the objective value of the work rendered, the human dignity of the subjects who perform it. Authentic economic well-being is pursued also by means of suitable *social policies for the redistribution of income* which, taking general conditions into account, look at merit as well as at the need of each citizen.

c. **The right to strike**

304. *The Church's social doctrine recognizes the legitimacy of striking* “when it cannot be avoided, or at least when it is necessary to obtain a proportionate benefit”,[663] when every other method for the resolution of disputes has been ineffectual.[664] Striking, one of the most difficult victories won by labour union associations, may be defined as the collective and concerted refusal on the part of workers to continue rendering their services, for the purpose of obtaining by means of such pressure exerted on their employers, the State or on public opinion either better working conditions or an improvement in their social status. Striking “as a kind of ultimatum” [665] must always be a peaceful method for making demands and fighting for one's rights; it becomes “morally unacceptable when accompanied by violence, or when objectives are included that are not directly linked to working conditions or are contrary to the common good”.[666]

VI. SOLIDARITY AMONG WORKERS

a. **The importance of unions**

305. *The Magisterium recognizes the fundamental role played by labour unions, whose existence is connected with the right to form associations or unions to defend the vital interests of workers employed in the various professions.* Unions “grew up from the struggle of the workers — workers in general but especially the industrial workers — to protect their just rights *vis-à-vis* the entrepreneurs and the owners of the means of production”.[667] Such organizations, while pursuing their specific purpose with regard to the common good, are a positive influence for social order and solidarity, and are therefore an *indispensable element of social life*. The recognition of workers' rights has always been a difficult problem to resolve because this recognition takes place within complex historical and institutional processes, and still today it

remains incomplete. This makes the practice of authentic solidarity among workers more fitting and necessary than ever.

306. *The Church's social doctrine teaches that relations within the world of work must be marked by cooperation: hatred and attempts to eliminate the other are completely unacceptable.* This is also the case because in every social system both “labour” and “capital” represent indispensable components of the process of production. In light of this understanding, the Church's social doctrine “does not hold that unions are no more than a reflection of the ‘class’ structure of society and that they are a mouthpiece for a class struggle which inevitably governs social life”.^[668] *Properly speaking, unions are promoters of the struggle for social justice, for the rights of workers in their particular professions: “This struggle should be seen as a normal endeavour ‘for’ the just good ... not a struggle ‘against’ others”.*^[669] Being first of all instruments of solidarity and justice, unions may not misuse the tools of contention; because of what they are called to do, they must overcome the temptation of believing that all workers should be union-members, they must be capable of self-regulation and be able to evaluate the consequences that their decisions will have on the common good.^[670]

307. *Beyond their function of defending and vindicating, unions have the duty of acting as representatives working for “the proper arrangement of economic life” and of educating the social consciences of workers so that they will feel that they have an active role, according to their proper capacities and aptitudes, in the whole task of economic and social development and in the attainment of the universal common good.*^[671] Unions and other forms of labour associations are to work in cooperation with other social entities and are to take an interest in the management of public matters. Union organizations have the duty to exercise influence in the political arena, making it duly sensitive to labour problems and helping it to work so that workers' rights are respected. Unions do not, however, have the character of “political parties” struggling for power, and they should not be forced to submit to the decisions of political parties nor be too closely linked to them. “In such a situation they easily lose contact with their specific role, which is to secure the just rights of workers within the framework of the common good of the whole of society; instead they become *an instrument used for other purposes*”.^[672]

b. New forms of solidarity

308. *The modern socio-economic context, characterized by ever more rapid processes of economic and financial globalization, prompts unions to engage in renewal. Today, unions are called to act in new ways,*^[673] widening the scope of their activity of solidarity so that protection is afforded not only to the traditional categories of workers, but also to workers with *non- standard* or limited-time contracts, employees whose jobs are threatened by business mergers that occur with ever increasing frequency, even at the international level; to those who do not have a job, to immigrants, seasonal workers and those who, because they have not had professional updating, have been dismissed from the labour market and cannot be re- admitted without proper re-training.

Given the changes that have taken place in the world of work, solidarity can be recovered, and perhaps with a firmer foundation in respect to the past, if the effort is made to rediscover the subjective value of work: “there must be continued study of the subject of work and of the

subject's living conditions". For this reason, "there is a need for ever new movements of solidarity of the workers and with the workers".[674]

309. Pursuing "new forms of solidarity",[675] workers' associations must focus their efforts on the acceptance of greater responsibilities not only in relation to the traditional mechanisms for redistribution but also in relation to the production of wealth and the creation of social, political and cultural conditions which will permit all who are able and willing to work to exercise their right to work in full respect for their dignity as workers. The gradual obsolescence of organizational models based on salaried workers in big business makes it fitting to update the norms and systems of social security that have traditionally protected workers and guaranteed their fundamental rights.

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Footnotes:

[651] Cf. John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Laborem Exercens*, 19: AAS 73 (1981), 625-629.

[652] Cf. John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Laborem Exercens*, 19: AAS 73 (1981), 625-629.

[653] John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Laborem Exercens*, 19: AAS 73 (1981), 629.

[654] John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Centesimus Annus*, 15: AAS 83 (1991), 812.

[655] Cf. John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Laborem Exercens*, 18: AAS 73 (1981), 622-625.

[656] Cf. John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Laborem Exercens*, 19: AAS 73 (1981), 625-629.

[657] Cf. John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Laborem Exercens*, 19: AAS 73 (1981), 625-629.

[658] Cf. Leo XIII, Encyclical Letter *Rerum Novarum: Acta Leonis XIII*, 11 (1892), 135; Pius XI, Encyclical Letter *Quadragesimo Anno*: AAS 23 (1931), 186; Pius XII, Encyclical Letter *Sertum Laetitiae*: AAS 31 (1939), 643; John XXIII, Encyclical Letter *Pacem in Terris*: AAS 55 (1963), 262-263; Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, 68: AAS 58 (1966), 1089-1090; John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Laborem Exercens*, 20: AAS 73 (1981), 629-632; John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Centesimus Annus*, 7: AAS 83 (1991), 801-802.

[659] Cf. John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Laborem Exercens*, 19: AAS 73 (1981), 625-629.

[660] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2434; cf. Pius XI, Encyclical Letter *Quadragesimo Anno*: AAS 23 (1931), 198-202: "The Just Wage" is the title of Chapter Four (nos. 65-76) of Part Two.

[661] Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, 67: AAS 58 (1966), 1088-1089.

[662] Leo XIII, Encyclical Letter *Rerum Novarum: Acta Leonis XIII*, 11 (1892), 131.

[663] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2435.

[664] Cf. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, 68: AAS 58 (1966), 1089-1090; John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Laborem Exercens*, 20: AAS 73 (1981), 629-632; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2430.

[665] John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Laborem Exercens*, 20: AAS 73 (1981), 632.

[666] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2435.

[667] John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Laborem Exercens*, 20: AAS 73 (1981), 629.

[668] John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Laborem Exercens*, 20: AAS 73 (1981), 630.

[669] John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Laborem Exercens*, 20: AAS 73 (1981), 630.

[670] Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2430.

[671] Cf. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, 68: AAS 58 (1966), 1090.

[672] John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Laborem Exercens*, 20: AAS 73 (1981), 631.

[673] Cf. John Paul II, Address to the International Conference for Union Representatives (2 December 1996), 4: *L'Osservatore Romano*, English edition, 11 December 1996, p. 8.

[674] John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Laborem Exercens*, 8: AAS 73 (1981), 597.

[675] John Paul II, Message to the Participants in the International Symposium on Work (14 September 2001), 4: *L'Osservatore Romano*, English edition, 17 October 2001, p. 3.