



The Catholic-Labor Network

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Dear Sir or Madam:

I am greatly concerned about the proposed regulatory changes embodied in the **National Security Personnel System**, and their effect on the rights of American workers to have a voice and input in their work.

In past years, our country has seen in great crises and threats to our security. During World War II, our country faced two war theaters. Yet, American union workers were not seen as impediments to our nations war efforts.

During the 40 years of the cold war, both Republican and Democratic president's did not feel the need to strip civilian employees of their labor rights. This was a time when trendous weapons of mass destruction were not just a potential, but were aimed at us from the old USSR and Eastern-Block countries.

Today, many of the 700,000 defense department workers who will be affected by the **National Security Personnel System** regulation changes are themselves veterans, and have heroically served in our armed forces. The implication in these new regulations are that present Department of Defense civilian employees will not respond to our nations needs in times of crisis in the manner. These are the children of parents and grandparents who were members of unions and served their country bravely. To feel the need for such sweeping regulations is an insult to their patriotism.

However, as a Catholic and one committed to the Catholic social gospel, I am tremendously disturbed by these regulations because they trounce the inherent human dignity that is given to each person by God and is proclaimed by my Church.

In 1986, the National Council of Catholic Bishops (now United States Conference of Catholic Bishops) issued a pastoral letter entitled: *Economic Justice for All*. In this document they stressed that any undermining of a worker's right to organize and participate in collective bargaining was an affront to his or her dignity. They wrote in paragraph 104:

"...No one may deny the right to organize without attacking human dignity itself. Therefore, we firmly oppose organized efforts, such as those regrettably now seen in this country, to break existing unions and prevent workers from organizing . . . "

Many of the proposed regulations, while not stripping workers of their right to join unions, strip the unions of having any role in the work environment. I am left with the question, "What does it mean to have a right to join a union, if the union cannot participate in collective bargaining, and assist me in promoting the common good at my job?"

When the U.S. Bishops issued this pastoral letter, they did not pull it out of thin air, but followed a tradition that stretched back to Pope Leo XIII in 1891. In his encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, Pope Leo stressed that the State had an obligation to promote and protect human associations including worker associations. He wrote:

"Although private societies exist within the State and are, as it were, so many parts of it, still it is not within the authority of the State universally and per se to forbid them to exist as such. For man is permitted by a right of nature to form private societies; the State, on the other hand, has been instituted to protect and not to destroy natural right, and if it should forbid its citizens to enter into associations, it would clearly do something contradictory to itself because both the State itself and private associations are begotten of one and the same principle, namely, that men are by nature inclined to associate."
(Paragraph 72)

More recently, Pope John Paul II has continued this tradition in his encyclical *On Human Work* in 1981:

“ Importance of Unions: To secure these rights, the workers need the right to association in labor or trade unions. These organizations should reflect the particular character of each work or profession. In a sense these unions go back to the guilds of the Middle Ages, which organized people on the basis of their work. Modern unions differ from these guilds because they grew from the workers' struggles to protect their rights in their relation to the owners of the means of production.

“History teaches us that organizations of this type are an indispensable element in social life, especially in industrialized societies. This does not mean that only industrial workers can form these associations. Every profession can use them: agricultural workers, white-collar workers, and employers. Catholic social teaching does not see unions as reflecting only a "class" structure, and even less as engaged in a "class" struggle. They are indeed engaged in the struggle for social justice, but this is a struggle for the common good, and not against others. Its aim is social justice and not the elimination of opponents. Work unites people; its social power builds community. Those who work and those who manage or own the means of production must in one way or another unite in this 'working' community. Even if people unite to secure their rights as workers, their unions remain constructive factors of social order and solidarity, impossible to overlook.”
(Paragraph 20)

Although human institutions are incomplete and in need of reform, the present regulations, by their ambiguity and lack of clear protection for the dignity of workers, by the protection of their right to association, raises tremendous concerns for me. It is truly a sad day in our country when in order to protect ourselves from those who wish to take away our freedom and inherent human dignity, we institute regulations that strip more than 700,000 of our fellow citizens of their natural right to associate because we cannot trust them sufficiently to serve their nation and promote the common good of their fellow citizens.

Yours in Christ,

Fr. Sinclair Oubre, J.C.L.
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