

As to his schooling, Sweeney writes, "I studied Catholic social teaching. In many ways, I learned a more detailed version of the values I'd been taught at home. Since men and women are created in God's image, their dignity must be respected. Working people have the right to a living wage—in fact, we used to say that breadwinners should earn a 'family wage' so that they could support their households. And though there will always be some churning in the economy, working people should not be cast aside like disposable parts when the last drop of energy and effort has been wrung out of them.

"Human dignity," Sweeney continues, "demands that workers have a voice on the job, and the Papal encyclicals we studied recognized the role of unions. Several priests and teaching brothers . . . taught me a lesson I try never to forget: A union must be a movement and a mission, not a business or a bureaucracy. In particular, they taught that organizing new mem-

bers is not only an institutional necessity but an ethical imperative. It is a practical example of the fortunate helping their less fortunate sisters and brothers."

"Recently, the United States Catholic Bishops said it all: 'The economy exists for the human person, not the other way around.'" He footnotes this, as follows: "For an excellent presentation of the progressive social teaching of the Catholic church, as well as the memoirs of our nation's leading labor priest, see Msgr. George C. Higgins" [SEE accompanying review].

Reviving the Labor Movement

Labor Day 1996 was like a breath of fresh air, reflecting what the new leadership of the AFL-CIO has achieved in just under a year, since their election last October. Hundreds of thousands of workers marched for their rights in parades in many cities, and the leadership of the AFL-CIO was marching with them, for the first time in years. In

fact, on the Friday before Labor Day, Sweeney himself was arrested for disorderly conduct at the headquarters of the union-busting Detroit News.

America Needs A Raise gives a glimpse into the real thinking behind Sweeney's decision to run against the Lane Kirkland regime, in the first contested election for the AFL-CIO presidency since the federation was formed, out of the AFL and the CIO, in 1955. Sweeney writes, "Working Americans had come to a critical point—with corporations downsizing, wages stagnating, unions declining, and our enemies seizing control of Congress. We waited for the top leader of the AFL-CIO to raise his voice or sound his trumpet—but the silence was deafening."

Now, the sound of a reinvigorated, fighting labor movement is scaring the pants off those who took out the "Contract on Americans." It couldn't have come at a better time.

—Marianna Wertz

The Church and the Labor Movement

At a moment when the U.S. labor movement, in decline for nearly three decades, is beginning to be revived under the new leadership of AFL-CIO President John Sweeney, this book by Msgr. George G. Higgins, written prior to Sweeney's election, sheds important light both on the vital historical role played by the social teaching of the Catholic Church in the U.S. labor movement, and on what that relationship must be in the future, for organized labor in the U.S. to play its indispensable role in serving the common good of the nation and the world, as we enter the new millennium.

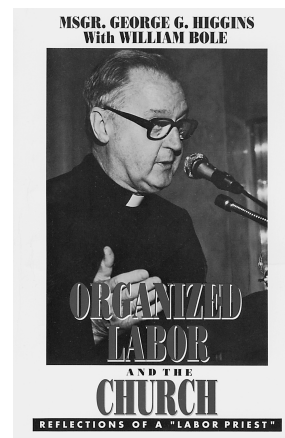
Monsignor Higgins is one of the most qualified persons alive today to discuss this issue. He served for thirty-six years in the Social Action Department of the United States Catholic Conference, twenty-five of those years as its director. Even after his retirement from the Conference in 1980, he has continued to serve as "the chaplain of the AFL-CIO."

In his preface, Msgr. Higgins asks:

"Will the Catholic Church, my Church, reclaim its heritage of support for the organization of average working people?" He answers: "I am afraid I cannot say for sure. In fact, the Church stands in danger of losing forever its tradition of cooperation with organized labor. It is for that reason, above all, that I wrote this book."

Higgins quotes from an article by Father John F. Cronin: "About 1966, there developed a sudden and dramatic turning away from the traditional methods of Catholic social teaching and social action. Encyclical courses were dropped from colleges and seminaries. Even updated books based on the social magisterium ceased to sell."

In contrast to today, when the Catholic laity are, in general, ignorant of the social teaching of their Church, Msgr. Higgins tells of the role of the Catholic Church and of the "labor priests," like himself, in defending the "God-given right of workers to organize" throughout the Twentieth centu-



Organized Labor and the Church: Reflections of a 'Labor Priest'

by Msgr. George G. Higgins, with William Bole
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ry, especially during the Depression years, in alliance with Franklin Delano Roosevelt. During this time, the Catholic social action movement placed a high priority on instructing not only priests and Catholic laity, but the entire

labor movement, in the encyclicals. Throughout the nation there existed Church-sponsored “labor schools,” in which working people were exposed to the social teaching of the Church. Thus, Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical *Rerum Novarum* effected a massive collaboration between American Catholicism and the labor movement.

Among the key priests in this movement identified by Msgr. Higgins were John A. Ryan and Raymond A. McGowan. Ryan drafted the bishops’ *Program of Social Reconstruction*, issued in 1919, just prior to the creation of the first bishops conference, the National Catholic Welfare Conference. Thirteen years before the New Deal, the program, reflecting the social encyclicals, endorsed a minimum wage, subsidized housing, labor participation in industrial management, child labor laws, and social insurance for the jobless, sick, and aged. Ryan would serve as the director of the Conference’s Social Action Department. McGowan was assistant director, until he replaced Ryan in 1945. Higgins succeeded McGowan in 1954.

In 1936, Ryan gave a radio speech titled “Roosevelt Safeguards America,” in which he criticized Rev. Charles Coughlin of Michigan, an influential opponent of Roosevelt, by pointing out that Coughlin’s economic theories and proposals “find no support in the encyclicals of either Pope Leo XIII or Pope Pius XI.” Ryan twice gave the benedictions at FDR’s Presidential inaugurations: once, in 1937, after helping to ensure his reelection, and again in 1945.

Organized Labor’s Decline

Higgins identifies the state of the labor movement today.

In the mid-1960’s, nearly a third of American workers were organized into unions. By 1992, that figure had shrunk to approximately seventeen percent—the lowest in any of the industrialized countries.

Union victories in elections supervised by the National Labor Relations Board have declined significantly, and attempts to decertify, or abolish, existing unions have increasingly succeeded.

Higgins then identifies one of the

biggest problems confronting labor today, which is that organized labor no longer has an effective right to strike, and therefore lacks the right to organize.

After President Ronald Reagan fired 12,000 striking air-traffic controllers in 1981 during the PATCO strike, employers have increasingly utilized the 1938 Supreme Court ruling in *NLRB v. MacKay Radio and Telegraph* to bust unions. This decision allows employers to replace striking employees with permanent replacement workers.

During the 1980’s, employers used the *MacKay* decision to fire striking workers and replace them permanently with strikebreakers. After twelve months, an employer may petition the NLRB for an election to decertify the union—an election in which the strikebreakers can vote, but the workers on strike can not.

Higgins points out that America is virtually the only industrialized country, along with South Africa, that permits this abuse.

Prospects for Rebirth

Nonetheless, Higgins argues that just as labor declined before 1932, and then came back over the following decades, “it is at least possible that an historical replay will happen in our own generation—probably less dramatically or, if you will, more incrementally than in the mid-1930’s—if we can summon the will to enact a kind of and degree of labor law reform more radical than the pallid type of reform which narrowly failed enactment in the 1970’s.”

He argues that the key to a rebirth of labor is, that labor must “reach out to those who need help the most—the masses of unorganized Americans. . . . I am happy to say that the labor movement has already begun to throw open the windows of a new industrial era.”

Higgins cites in particular the efforts of the SEIU, in 1993 headed by John Sweeney, whom he describes as “one of the new labor pioneers.” He writes that Sweeney has launched a long-term organizing campaign among the nation’s estimated one million custodial workers, called “Justice for Janitors.” The campaign is aimed at a largely

female and minority work force. The SEIU has also begun to organize maids and other domestic workers, and has set the pace in the movement for national health insurance and in the organization of hospital workers.

Higgins advises that the labor movement concentrate heavily on women in the workplace. Women make up nearly half of all workers, yet only a minuscule percentage of them are organized into unions. He also advises that labor pay significant attention to the problems of immigrant workers. “Without female and immigrant workers, the labor movement has no future in this country.”

In the final chapter of his book, “Catholic Social Teaching and Action,” Higgins argues that unions are not only legitimate, but indispensable. As he emphasizes, “every person is made in the image and likeness of God and endowed with a special dignity, which is not dependent upon accidental characteristics such as social status. This dignity finds expression in a set of basic human rights, economic as well as political.

“Forgetting or despairing over the labor problem would amount to a betrayal of our American Catholic heritage. . . . And as in the Nineteenth and early Twentieth century, a significant number of these immigrants, if not most of them, are at least marginally Catholic. In our so-called ‘upwardly mobile’ Church, this is top secret: that we are still a Church of immigrants—millions of newcomers, principally from Asia and Latin America, who need the support for their economic rights that the Church gave to our European forebears.”

As the ongoing global financial disintegration forecast by Lyndon LaRouche accelerates, the U.S. labor movement will play an increasingly important role in reversing the 30-year decline in the economy, and in contributing to social reconstruction. Monsignor Higgins’ *Reflections* are a welcome intervention to revive the labor-Civil Rights coalition in this country, and to remind not only the Catholic Church, but all men and women of good will, of the importance of the Catholic social encyclicals as a basis for social action today.

—William F. Wertz, Jr