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Sisters and Brothers in faith,

The Ohio Senate is currently debating the issue of collective bargaining by public employees. Senate Bill 5 would restrict collective bargaining and weaken legal protection for public employees such as police, firefighters, and school teachers. It would prohibit public workers from striking and might eliminate binding arbitration for some. It attempts to address Ohio's massive budget shortfall by reducing the bargaining power of public employees.

This is a complicated issue that I don't pretend to understand fully. Nor do I think I advocate for the only position a faithful United Church of Christ member – or a sincere Christian – might hold. There will be different opinions. But I want to offer these thoughts as we enter a turbulent, divisive debate.

Collective bargaining is how fire fighters have been able to secure safety standards. Collective bargaining by teachers has secured classroom conditions such as reasonable class size and caseloads for public school counselors. Collective bargaining is how a basic salary floor has been established for school teachers, thereby establishing a climate to attract well qualified professionals.

Those whose livelihoods will be undermined by the passage of Senate Bill 5 teach our children, drive the school buses, protect and patrol our streets, put out fires, provide transportation for the disabled and elderly, plow our streets, tend our parks, and fix our waterlines when they freeze. These people are woven into the fabric of our communities.

Paying workers adequately and giving workers a voice in their workplace actually strengthens our communities and the economy. Workers who are reasonably well compensated create more stable communities, do not have as much need for public services, can build assets and spend locally, and are better able to focus on and excel at their jobs.

General Synod XXI, meeting in 1997, spoke to the right of workers to organize unions to promote their interests in the workplace:

Therefore, Be It Resolved that the Twenty-first General Synod reaffirms the heritage of the United Church of Christ as an advocate for just, democratic, participatory and inclusive economic policies in both public and private sectors, including ... the responsibility of workers to organize for collective bargaining with employers regarding wages, benefits, and working conditions, and the responsibility of employers to respect not only worker rights but also workers' dignity, and to create and maintain a climate conducive to the workers' autonomous decision to organize.

I know that United Church of Christ members across the Ohio Conference will have different opinions about this debate. We will find ourselves on different sides of the issue. Some will side with

workers and their rights; others will point to the urgency of balancing a state budget and confess that they cannot find any other avenues for doing so.

So why am I, as a leader in the church, wading into this conversation? Wherever we fall on this issue, it is timely to be reminded of the words of Rev. Washington Gladden, UCC forebear and leader in the Social Gospel movement, who wrote exactly 100 years ago:

Briefly, then, we may say that the labor question is in part an economic question, and that all economic questions are fundamentally religious questions; that there are no purely spiritual interests, since the spiritual forces all incarnate themselves in the facts of every-day life, and can only be known as they are there manifested; that there is indeed danger that the Church will make mistakes in dealing with such questions, but that the greatest of all mistakes is in ignoring them; that there are no souls that are more in need of saving than the souls that are getting entangled in the materialisms that undervalue [hu]manhood; and that there are no people who need moral guidance more than those who are grappling with the manifold phases of the labor question.

Though we may disagree on issues of substance, such as Senate Bill 5, these issues are too important not to debate. Our unity as Christians is based upon our oneness in Christ, not upon our agreement on any particular issue. Let's talk.

Faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rev. Bob Molsberry". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Rev. Bob Molsberry
Ohio Conference Minister
United Church of Christ