

# Why People of Faith Support Labor Unions



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Sometimes we wonder: why do people of faith support workers? Why support unions?

Christians are called to accompany people wherever they are and especially through the rough places of their lives. So we must be in offices, factories, stores, farms, schools, health care facilities, and all the places where people work and, particularly, where low-wage workers are employed. The reign of God does not end at the door of the workplace. People of God stand with workers as they seek dignity on the job, a voice at work, safe workplaces, and fair and adequate compensation for their labor.

The right to form, organize, or join a union is a fundamental, internationally-recognized human right listed in the 1948 United Nation's Declaration of Human Rights. But our nation's laws provide weak protections for workers' right to form a union. Laws are frequently violated, penalties are minimal and do not serve as a deterrent, and redress is often delayed or inadequate.

We are called to stand with workers in this in-between space: between what is and our vision of God's reign where all workers are treated with justice and dignity.

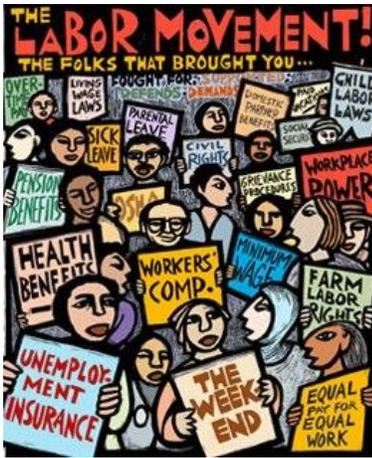
We can lift up an alternative vision of the workplace and call for change. We can name the standards that we want to see governing our work lives, the standards we believe God is calling for, even if the laws are not there yet. We can recognize that every worker, even those receiving the lowest pay, are highly-valued children of God, deserving of a fair share of the resources that God provides. No one is undeserving. Everyone deserves a living wage. We can work to change the laws governing the workplace to ensure workers are protected and treated fairly.



We can also be ambassadors for the union movement. Over 50 million workers, over half of all union-eligible workers, would like to form or join a union. Strengthening our labor laws would help them achieve this goal. There are millions of other people who know little about unions except the negative propaganda of the past 25 years. They can't understand why the faith community would get involved with unions.

## Why Congress Must Pass the Employee Free Choice Act

For over three decades, union membership in the U.S. has declined. This is one important reason why our workers are not faring well. Wages are falling or stagnant, millions lack health insurance and pensions, injury rates are too high, and workers lack input in decision-making processes. Meanwhile, corporate profits sky-rocketed, greed became a virtue, and corporate-driven ideology eroded regulatory safeguards. The rich got richer while the poor and middle class got what was left over. This skewed playing field -- which enabled the housing and credit bubbles -- is not the foundation for a sound economy. Now, more than ever, workers need unions and over 50 million workers say they would like to join one. But current law makes this nearly impossible. The right of workers to form or join a union was proclaimed in the 1948 United Nations Declaration of Human Rights. But, today, millions of workers in the U.S. do not enjoy this internationally-recognized human right. It is time for this to change. The Employee Free Choice Act would begin to level the playing field and protect workers' rights to form a union, should they choose to do so.



Northland Poster Collective

Many people don't realize that every 17 minutes a worker is illegally fired or disciplined for union activity. Many people don't know that a National Labor Relations Board-sponsored union election is more like an election in the former Soviet Union than one in the U.S. They don't know that while God gave us the Sabbath, unions brought us the weekend, and also Workers' Compensation Insurance, Unemployment Insurance, the minimum wage, health and safety regulations, Social Security, and many other important social programs.

Unions also brought us the middle class. Unions raise wages and improve benefits, especially for workers in the bottom and middle of the wage scale. Unions narrow the historic wage gaps associated with race, sex, and ethnicity.

Union workers are often more productive workers. At Costco, the discount retailer where many of the workers are in a union, labor costs

are 40% higher than at its competitor Sam's Club, part of nonunion, low-wage Wal-Mart. But Costco's operating profit, per employee, is nearly double that of Sam's Club because of the workers' higher productivity.

The growing inequality and stagnant wages of the past couple of decades have a number of causes but one of them is the decline in the share of the workforce who is represented by a union.

Fully one-quarter of all jobs in the U.S. pay poverty-level wages so low that a full-time worker cannot support a family of four above poverty. One in every six people has no health insurance and nearly all these uninsured people are working people and their families. One out of every 10 people who want to work cannot find a job or cannot find a full-time one. Roughly half of all workers have no retirement plan of any kind, not even a 401(k). Wage theft (not paying workers for all the hours they work) is epidemic as is the abuse of immigrant workers. Meanwhile, income inequality is at record highs. That is, the rich get richer, the poor get poorer, and the middle class shrinks.



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.

Unions and workers' rights are as important today as at any time in our history. In the face of weak laws, the hostility of many employers, an uninformed public, and a largely indifferent media, the Church's support is critically important.

Jesus was a low-wage worker. Like Jesus, today's low-wage workers and *all* workers are beloved and treasured sons and daughters of God. Let us walk with them and support their efforts to form unions.

God gave us a world of abundance, enough for all, a place where all God's children are equal. Unions, with the support of the Church, are helping make that vision a reality.

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