

## **A CALL FOR ECONOMIC JUSTICE**

Bishop Ricardo Ramírez, C.S.B.

Labor Day is dedicated to the social and economic achievements of American workers and is observed as an annual national tribute to what workers have contributed to the strength, progress and well-being of our country. What may not be generally known is that the observance of Labor Day began in the aftermath of some of the most turbulent labor unrest in the history of the United States.

After the Civil War, the Industrial Revolution brought enormous demand for factory workers. Working conditions were deplorable. There was practically no concern for safety, pay was low, benefits were non-existent and the work day was usually 10 to 12 hours, six days a week.

In 1882, the Knights of Labor advocated celebrating Labor Day on the first Monday of September on an annual basis. Later, in a May Day incident in Chicago, police were sent to protect a group of strike-breakers where fighting resulted in the death of one person and injuries to several others. And at a later date, anarchists protested alleged police brutality leading to a confrontation in which seven policemen were killed along with four protesters.

Eventually, in 1887, following the violent events of the Haymarket riots, the U. S. Congress and President Grover Cleveland made the first Monday of September the official national observance of Labor Day.

This Labor Day finds our country struggling with a broken economy that is not producing enough decent jobs. Officially over 12 million workers are looking for work and millions more have given up seeking employment. Millions are underemployed and over ten million families find themselves among the “working poor.” Factually, 46 million U. S. citizens live in poverty and over 16 million children in our nation are impoverished. Clearly, this dismal reality indicates a serious economic and moral failure for our nation.

People of faith and others of good will are called to stand with those left behind, offering our solidarity and joining forces with “the least of these” to help meet their basic needs. We must unite in efforts to attain a national economic renewal that places working people and their families at the center of a more vibrant economic life.

In the current political campaigns public officials debate the need to reform our economy and reduce federal deficits and debt, but we hear almost nothing about the *moral imperative* to overcome pervasive poverty in a nation blessed with mighty economic resources and power.

Compounding the situation is that, similar to the 1800s, workers still struggle for just wages, a safe workplace and a voice in the economy. This is especially true of women who face unequal pay and employment. Immigrants, too, are often very vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.

Unions and other worker organizations are uniquely challenged by the need for economic renewal. Our Church has long taught that unions are “an indispensable element of social life, especially in industrialized societies” (John Paul II). Unions bring workers together to speak and act collectively to protect their rights and pursue the common good.

But like other institutions, including religious, business and civic groups, unions sometimes fall short of their ideals and purpose. Yet when they *do* fall short, that failure must not negate Catholic teaching in support of unions and the protection of working people. Rather, it calls for honest dialogue and a renewed approach to defend workers.

This Labor Day is a time for recommitment on the part of us all, particularly those in business, labor and government, to work together to build a productive economy that offers opportunity, creates jobs, generates growth, and protects the dignity of working people and their families.

Please join us religious leaders in a special prayer for the millions of working people, especially for those without a job. May God guide our nation in creating an economy that lives up to the ideal of economic justice for all.