

Labor Day is a chance to reflect on Catholic social teaching

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Most of us enjoy the three-day weekend supplied by Labor Day, a holiday established by the labor movement to celebrate American workers. And yet, the movement that gave us the holiday seems to have lost favor in state governments across the nation. In fact, the National Conference of State Legislatures identified 744 bills, covering almost every state, targeting collective bargaining by public employees. The Utah Legislature joins in those efforts on a regular basis, taking particular interest in educators, and is likely to do so again in the 2012 session.

For Catholics, government efforts to eliminate or hamstring employee unions undermine one of our core teachings — people have a right and obligation to organize to protect the life and dignity of workers. As Pope John Paul II stated in 1992, "The right of association is a natural right of the human being ... Indeed, the formation of unions cannot ... be prohibited by the state because the state is bound to protect natural rights ..." The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops adds, "all people have the right to economic initiative, to productive work, to just wages and benefits, to decent working conditions, as well as to organize and join unions or other associations."

As with all rights, there are caveats. Unions must use the right to organize to build a just society. In Catholic teaching, unions are meant to protect the dignity of all workers, not just union members, promote workers as a whole, and bring value to employers through the work of their members and by providing training to improve workers' skills and productivity.

Catholic social teaching asserts that unions are a "positive influence for social order and solidarity, and are therefore an indispensable element of social life." As part of the larger society that benefits from unions, we all have a duty to defend the rights of workers to associate through unions and bargain for safer, saner, more just workplaces and economic policies.

This is not to say that unions are always right. Just like elected officials, union leaders may lose sight of their broader purpose and focus more on personal power or "winning" points. As Catholics, we look to the basic principles of our teaching to guide our decisions about any and all economic matters, including legislation regarding unions, as well as union efforts to promote workers' rights. The USCCB reminds us that all economic institutions (unions, governments, businesses) must be judged by how they protect or undermine the life and dignity of the human person, support the family and serve the common good.

If a union fails to use its rights according to these principles, changes are in order. If, however, government reacts by attempting to destroy the union, it also fails as an economic institution and needs to reconsider whether its actions support families, human dignity, and the common good.

When analyzing legislative or local government proposals regarding unions or collective bargaining, consider these principles and share your views with your elected officials. Then sit back and enjoy your well earned Labor Day.

If you have questions about Catholic social teaching you would like addressed in this column, please send your ideas to jean.hill@dioslc.org. And be sure to visit the Catholic Diocese of Salt Lake City on Facebook.