

Work as Key to the Social Question

The Great Social and Economic Transformations and the Subjective Dimension of Work



Labour and Unions

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The Encyclicals *Laborem exercens* and *Centesimus annus* underline the importance of labour unions. This cannot fail to be a source of comfort for those who are active in the area of worker organizations, whether they are believers or not. The Church's clear position in this regard is in stark contrast with a widespread, and not completely innocent, idea that often underlies a recurring public and even academic debate in certain sectors of the business community. According to their debate, labour unions are drawing to an honourable end --at least I hope it is honourable-- and in any case are becoming more or less irrelevant. Born of the first industrial revolution, at least in the form of unionization of workers, they now would have nothing or little to say in the social and economic context that we know today, a context that has undergone such radical change. I believe that this is a hasty judgment and, I repeat, one that is made not without ulterior motivation. Feeling that I am, if I may say so, "in good company", I shall attempt to refute this position. It is not that unions do not have their limits or defects — I shall speak of these later. But I believe that they remain the principal force capable of expressing solidarity in the world of labour. In fact, labour unions, through the initiatives undertaken, are capable of ensuring above all association among workers and negotiation with opposing parties (and when necessary, conflict), as well as the advancement of worker conditions and the promotion of the dignity of human labour in the world. Unions remain relevant because, if the labour problem is the key to the social question, I believe that this question is still with us, and forcefully so, in Europe and even more so in developing countries. Naturally, speaking of Europe, no one denies the progress that has been made, largely due to the battles undertaken by worker movements. But it is clear that if problems are present today under new forms, their substance remains the same. Unemployment is a reality for large numbers of people above all in certain regions of Europe. I know that other presentators have spoken about the international dimension. Therefore, except for citing one aspect, I shall not refer here to the report of the Director-General of the International Labour Organization, Mr. Juan Somavia, presented earlier this year at the International Conference on Labour, which presents extremely serious and alarming data. I am speaking here of the denunciation of the

violation of the rights of labour unions in two out of three member countries of the United Nations.

This is also proof that the social question is still with us. But moving on to European countries — which are certainly in a better position, and it is enough to go just a little bit outside Europe and look back to see how much better off we are — the problem is not only the lack of work but also the decreasing quality of work. There is a report of the Dublin Foundation, presented a few months ago, that shows the deterioration of labour conditions in the workplace from the perspectives of health and safety. There is discrimination against the weaker members of the world of work. For example, it is sufficient to think of the disparity in pay-scales between men and women. To be brief, there is above all great insecurity moving through the world of work, not only for the unemployed but also for young people and women with jobs at risk. More and more in Europe today it is not enough to have a job in order to have a decent salary to maintain one's family. The phenomenon of the "working poor" is present here too. Worry and uncertainty is also felt by those who have a job. The great transformations taking place in the area of production are brought about with no or very little consideration for workers, for the dignity of work.

The news reports these last few months tell us that businesses, both international and otherwise, are looking more and more only at profits and stock market quotations, and therefore proceed with the closing of plants, restructuring and relocation, with the result that thousands, tens of thousands of people simply find themselves, from one day to the next, without a job (and here there is no difference between old and new economy). I do not think that this is the time to maintain that labour unions no longer have a social role to play. On the contrary, and without ignoring the role of other entities and, in the first place, of public authorities, there is more need than ever for free, independent, representative, strong and capable unions. Someone will add "responsible". Certainly, responsible, but determined to stand up for those values of dignity, of justice that figure so often in the social doctrine of the Catholic Church.

From the point of view of labour union movements, the profound transformations that we are experiencing call for a shared, harmonious and negotiated style of leadership. The same is true for the more difficult structural reforms — such as those involving the job market, which is less rigid in Europe today than ten years ago — and the welfare state, which must be adapted to new conditions but also to new social needs. These reforms, affecting the lives of so many people who basically have only their own work as a means for maintaining themselves and their families, can in fact be brought about in two ways: they can be imposed, and then there will be conflict; or they can be negotiated with labour organizations in order to seek the needed agreement that will allow the reforms to be brought about while at the same time safeguarding fundamental social rights. Therefore, in this project of transformation, "social dialogue" at the level of Europe and industrial relations in individual countries are more necessary than ever: dialogue and social relations among collective subjects which recognize each other mutually. Now, if — as in many European nations — employer organizations in recent years have made great and broad efforts, though without being completely successful, to dismantle the system of collective bargaining, this means that another way must be found, that of forced relations. In this

sense, for example, the opposition of German employers to improvements — amounting to quite modest changes actually — in the law on codetermination represents a troubling sign in that it seems to bring into question the foundations of «Rhine capitalism», which remains one of the essential points of reference for the European social model and which makes this model different from other realities, such as that found in America. In this phase of change, it is useful to recall two principle demands of the labour union movement. The first concerns the urgent need to give all workers a kind of «passport» for their future, through permanent formation. If we are witnessing today the extinction of the concept of "job" in the classical sense, what better guarantee is there than life-long formation made available to workers in order to ensure, in contexts of accelerated mobility also, the possibility of decent work? This is likewise necessary to avoid the risk identified by Jeremy Rifkin, that only a portion of the labour force — one worker out of five is the ratio given — is able to make full use of the new instruments of knowledge and information. This would be an unacceptable division of the labour force, with permanent workers, skilled workers, knowledgeable workers on one side, and, on the other, unskilled and temporary workers, for which businesses themselves would feel less responsibility. Everyone must have the opportunity to engage in different kinds of work.

The other question is found in the rights of expression in the world of labour. It is necessary to broaden the possibilities that workers have of taking part in different ways — through industrial and economic democracy and financial participation under certain conditions too — in the life of the enterprise, and also of organizing themselves so as to have an active role in defining economic and development policies through dialogue between labour and management. These are the central demands of the labour union movement in Europe that respond to the need for a socially balanced management of the great transformations that we are experiencing.

I said that I would speak also of the weak points of labour unions. There are at least two. The first involves problems with how the representational nature of unions is given concrete expression. It is clear that the labour union movement in Europe, and on other continents as well, has built its strength in large enterprises, in industrial labour, in assembly-line factory work. Now, all of this is tending to become obsolete and will disappear sooner or later. There no longer exists a typical, standard model of labour, rather there are many atypical models. The "services" economy is in full development. Small and medium-sized businesses are taking on ever important roles. We must be able to open ourselves and represent fully the interests — and also the aspirations, needs and demands — of a world of labour that is becoming ever more specialized and varied. In all of this there is the pressing question of women in the workplace. It is obviously not enough that women become union members, as is happening more and more; rather, the feminine perspective needs to be integrated ever more effectively into the culture, organization and demands of labour unions.

The second challenge involves the international dimension. Today, the labour union movement can no longer afford to be limited to national concerns, because of the very process of the globalization of the economy and of the role that transnational companies play in this process. Here too substantial progress must be made, which we are trying to

achieve in Europe, under particular conditions to be sure, with the European Confederation of Labour Unions.

I conclude by referring to globalization. I share in great part what was said by Mr. Camdessus regarding governance. At the worldwide level, I too believe that it is necessary to complete the system of organizations of the United Nations family, and above all to democratize them by giving them consistent guiding policies. Some U.N. agencies could already be used today in a much more effective way; such is the case with the International Labour Organization (ILO). Its conventions on social rights and the rights of labour unions are often disregarded by the very governments that sign them.

Then there is great hesitation in applying the sanctions that the ILO Charter calls for in the most extreme cases of violation of rights. The case of Burma, against which the ILO is threatening sanctions because of the practice of forced labour imposed by the ruling military junta, will become a test in the next few months of the will of the member States of the ILO to give concrete follow-up to the solemn declarations of principle.

Also collective actors, unions and the business world must assume their responsibilities.

In fact, nothing stands in the way of these agencies promoting, through their supranational representations, voluntary agreements and codes of conduct for respecting the fundamental rights of workers. There are already some signs in this direction, and they must be encouraged and extended. In this way, labour and management can contribute to giving a "human face" to the processes of globalization, and to globalizing not only markets and finances, but at the same time also development, human rights and social justice.