



Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development  
Domestic Social Development  
International Justice and Peace

**Protecting the Rights of Workers in a Globalized Economy  
February 2013**

*The global context in which work takes place also demands that national labour unions, which tend to limit themselves to defending the interests of their registered members, should turn their attention to those outside their membership, and in particular to workers in developing countries where social rights are often violated.*

*-Caritas in Veritate, Pope Benedict XVI, No. 64.*

### **ISSUE**

Human labor has an inherent dignity; at its best, labor allows us to share in the ongoing work of creation. Since [\*Rerum Novarum\*](#), Catholic teaching has affirmed this dignity and articulated the rights of workers that flow from it: "...the right to a just wage; the right to rest; the right 'to a working environment and to manufacturing processes which are not harmful to the workers' physical health or to their moral integrity'; the right that one's personality in the workplace should be safeguarded 'without suffering any affront to one's conscience or personal dignity'; the right to appropriate subsidies that are necessary for the subsistence of unemployed workers and their families; the right to a pension and to insurance for old age, sickness, and in case of work-related accidents; the right to social security connected with maternity; the right to assemble and form associations" ([\*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church\*](#), no. 301).

These rights are universal; however, "[i]n our present day, this conflict [between labor and capital] shows aspects that are new and perhaps more disquieting: scientific and technological progress and the globalization of markets, of themselves a source of development and progress, expose workers to the risk of being exploited by the mechanisms of the economy and by the unrestrained quest for productivity" ([\*Compendium\*](#), no. 279). Catholics must affirm "that a globalization of safeguards, minimum essential rights and equity is necessary" (no. 310).

#### *Right to Association*

The Church has consistently upheld the rights of workers to form associations. Unions empower workers to bargain and negotiate with the large and more powerful economic institutions and structures of government, and have been called "an indispensable element of social life, especially in modern industrialized societies" ([\*Laborem Exercens\*](#), no. 20). Catholic teaching on "the promotion of workers' associations that can defend their rights must therefore be honoured today even more than in the past, as a prompt and far-sighted response to the urgent need for new forms of cooperation at the international level, as well as the local level" ([\*Caritas in Veritate\*](#), no. 25).

Cooperation with management and an acknowledgment of all parties' rights and responsibilities remain hallmarks of our teaching, and all parties are called to reject antagonism and attempts to weaken or eliminate others. ([\*Compendium\*](#), no. 306). Moreover, globalization challenges unions, management, and others to act and think in new ways (no. 308).

Earlier this year, the [U.S. Department of Labor reported](#) that union representation in the domestic workforce continues to decline. While 11.3 percent of all workers belong to unions, only 6.6 percent of employees in the private sector do so. Both rates are historic lows. This means that increasingly workers are losing an important tool for protecting their rights.

## *Wages*

In the United States, the decline in union membership has been accompanied by an increase in low-wage work. The Department of Labor reports that there are over [10.5 million workers classified as “working poor.”](#) The ranks of the working poor are growing, representing over seven percent of the total workforce--the largest percentage of the workforce in over 20 years.

The [Catechism of the Catholic Church](#) teaches: “A just wage is the legitimate fruit of work. To refuse or withhold it can be a grave injustice.... Remuneration for work should guarantee man the opportunity to provide a dignified livelihood for himself and his family on the material, social, cultural, and spiritual level...” (no. 2434). Pope John XXIII also stressed “the remuneration of work is not something that can be left to the laws of the marketplace; nor should it be a decision left to the will of the more powerful. It must be determined in accordance with justice and equity.... The above principles are valid always and everywhere” ([Mater et Magistra](#), no 71-72).

## *Bilateral trade agreements and the role of labor protections*

Recent experiences involving free trade agreements between the United States and developing countries, most notably Peru and Colombia, illustrate the role of these accords with respect to pertinent national labor standards. The U.S.-Peru Free Trade Agreement was ratified and came into force in 2009 and incorporated important and enforceable provisions into the trade agreement text, including labor and environmental protections. It is the first such trade agreement involving the United States that incorporates these provisions.

The U.S.-Colombia trade agreement faced serious obstacles in Congress because of Colombia’s past record on protecting human and labor rights, as well as its treatment of indigenous people. The Church in the United States and Colombia promoted the adoption of new Colombian laws to protect human rights, labor reforms and the property claims of indigenous peoples. Passage of the trade agreement was made possible because Colombia adopted these protections.

USCCB does not take positions for or against complex trade agreements, but does offer ethical criteria to help guide policies on trade. USCCB criteria on trade include:

- Trade agreements should treat labor and environmental concerns as integral to trade agreements and not as peripheral matters.
- Trade agreements should lead to economic and social improvements at home and abroad, particularly for poor and vulnerable workers and their families; this can be accomplished by adopting internationally agreed upon labor standards and by ensuring there is a safety net in sectors that would be affected by the agreements.
- Trade agreements should foster the right to organize and bargain collectively.
- Trade agreements should encourage and not undermine the ability of poor countries to promote environmental protection and sustainable agricultural practices.
- The impact of trade on migration should be concretely addressed when trade measures are considered.

## **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

[usccb.org/about/international-justice-and-peace/](http://usccb.org/about/international-justice-and-peace/) and [usccb.org/globalpoverty](http://usccb.org/globalpoverty)  
[usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/labor-employment/](http://usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/labor-employment/)  
[Primer on the Rights and Responsibilities of Workers and Labor Unions](#)  
[USCCB 2012 Labor Day Statement](#)

## **FOR MORE INFORMATION**

Richard Coll, Office of International Justice and Peace: (202) 541-3153; [rcoll@usccb.org](mailto:rcoll@usccb.org)  
Thomas Mulloy, Office of Domestic Social Development: (202) 541-3445; [tmulloy@usccb.org](mailto:tmulloy@usccb.org)