



## From *Rerum Novarum* to the Modern World: On the Conditions of Labor Today

*“What the woman who labors wants is the right to live, not simply exist — the right to life as the rich woman has the right to life, and the sun and music and art. You have nothing that the humblest worker has not a right to have also. The worker must have bread, but she must have roses too.”*

—Rose Schneiderman

### ***Rerum Novarum* and Catholic Social Teaching on Worker Justice**

Over the course of the nineteenth century’s Industrial Revolution, the Western world experienced unprecedented societal transformation and growth. Though countries saw skyrocketing capital and a rise in average incomes, the sudden population explosion and mass migration into the cities also brought significant hardship. In response to widespread exploitation in the workplace and the miserable conditions of the working poor, and motivated as well by a desire to suppress socialist ideology and growing class conflict, Pope Leo XIII published his 1891 encyclical, *Rerum Novarum* (*On the Condition of Labor*). One of the foundational texts of Catholic social teaching, this document articulated such tenets as:

- The *common good*: “it cannot but be good for the commonwealth to shield from misery those on whom it so largely depends for the things that it needs” (34);
- The *preferential option for the poor*: “God Himself seems to incline rather to those who suffer misfortune; for Jesus Christ calls the poor ‘blessed’; He lovingly invites those in labor and grief to come to Him for solace; and He displays the tenderest charity toward the lowly and the oppressed” (24);
- And the *dignity of the human person*: “to misuse men as though they were things in the pursuit of gain, or to value them solely for their physical powers — that is truly shameful and inhuman” (20).

*Rerum Novarum* notably underscored the idea of rights and duties—that employers have a moral responsibility to pay their employees a fair, living wage and provide safe working conditions, and that the government has a responsibility to protect the poor, provide for welfare, and act “with that justice which is called *distributive*” (33). The document emphasizes that it is only by the labor and cooperation of the working class that states are enriched; as such, justice demands that workers receive sufficient wages and benefits to enjoy the fruits of their labor. Additionally, Leo XIII explicitly condemned unfettered capitalism and recognized the inherent right to form trade unions and engage in collective bargaining.



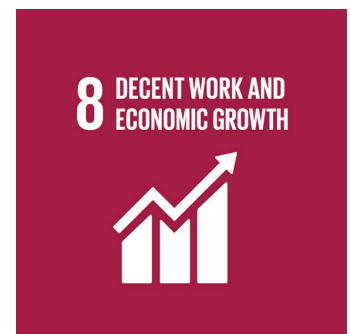
Since the publication of *Rerum Novarum*, later documents, papal encyclicals, and Bishops' statements have affirmed and expanded the Church's commitment to workers' rights. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* clearly states that the preferential option for the poor is incompatible with greed and immoderate love of wealth: "Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out; and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. ... You have condemned, you have killed the righteous man; he does not resist you' (James 5:1-6). 'Not to enable the poor to share in our goods is to steal from them and deprive them of life. the goods we possess are not ours, but theirs.' The demands of justice must be satisfied first of all; that which is already due in justice is not to be offered as a gift of charity. When we attend to the needs of those in want, we give them what is theirs, not ours. More than performing works of mercy, we are paying a debt of justice" (2445-2446).

Pope Pius XI's *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931) and John XXIII's *Mater et Magistra* (1961) encouraged the Church and government authorities to take on a more robust role in the reconstruction of the economic social order. Both spoke extensively on the need for greater solidarity and argued that private property loses its morality if not subordinated to the common good. In *Laborem Exercens* (1981), Pope John Paul II wrote on the spirituality of work (holding that work is essential to human nature), and emphasized a philosophy of personalism—valuing workers as human beings with dignity rather than as mere commodities. He also discussed the rights of disabled persons, the difficulties faced by migrant workers, and his growing concern with conditions in the modern world of work that have led to unemployment, inadequate wages, and forced labor. The United States Bishops have published numerous pastoral letters emphasizing that economic life must be shaped by moral principles. Most recently, Pope Francis's *Laudato Si'* (2015) and *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013) have expanded on the dignity of human work and just economic growth that does not push people to the margins.

## On the Conditions of Labor Today

### Decent Work and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals

The International Labour Organization (ILO), a specialized agency of the United Nations, has as its aim the development of labor standards, policies, and programs that promote human and labor rights throughout the globe. The ILO identifies **decent work**—"work that is productive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for families, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives, and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and women"—as the key to achieving fair globalization and reducing poverty. The concept of decent work comprises a key part of the UN's most recent 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with Goal 8 calling for the "promotion of sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work." These words align closely with Pope Francis's appeal to true freedom of labor, in which "labor is not an instrument of alienation, but of hope and new life" (23 May 2015), and his call for "the creation of dignified jobs to combat the social plague of underemployment" (2016 World Day of Peace Message).



## The Rise of Precarity and Informality

Scholars today recognize the important shift that has occurred in the developed world over the past few decades, from “Fordism” (a term widely used to describe the system of mass production pioneered in the early twentieth century) to the knowledge economy (a system in which production and value are based on intellectual capital). This transformation was two-fold:

1. Economies saw a shift away from a manufacturing-based economy (millions of manufacturing and service jobs were outsourced to countries with low wages and regulations) to a white-collar, service, and retail-based economy. Those who did not have the skills and capital to access these new jobs increasingly faced the prospect of unemployment or taking on low-paying, low-benefit, and often exploitative jobs.
2. There was a shift away from long-term, stable employment relations to shorter-term employment arrangements, informality, and precarious work.



As the Industrial Revolution marked a historical turning point for the labor market, so too has this recent transition to post-industrialism. Today, informal employment accounts for up to three quarters of non-agricultural employment in the world’s developing regions: 82% in South Asia, 66% in Sub-Saharan Africa, 65% in East and Southeast Asia, 51% in Latin America, 45% in the Middle East and North Africa, and 10% in Eastern Europe and Central Asia<sup>1</sup>. The majority of new employment in recent years, particularly in developing and transitioning countries, has been in the informal economy.

Informality encompasses all from the most visible (street vendors, waste pickers, rickshaw pullers, day laborers, and Uber drivers) to the least visible (domestic workers, home-based garment sector workers in the global supply chain, and call center workers). Informal workers tend to experience poor-quality, unproductive, and un-remunerative jobs that are concentrated among lower-grade occupations. The **informal economy** is defined broadly as the “diversified set of economic activities, enterprises,

jobs, and workers that are not regulated or protected by the state”<sup>2</sup>; in other words, informality includes all forms of employment without legal and social protection. **Precarious work** has also increasingly come into use, referring to work performed with variable degrees of uncertainty and insecurity (e.g. the “gig economy”). Although forms of precarious work differ depending on national context, they are usually characterized by uncertain duration of employment, multiple employers or disguised employment relationships, and lack of access to social protection and benefits usually associated with employment.

Trade unions have long played a central role in protecting and improving the interests of workers, but labor law and organizing strategies were historically centered on the notion of a clear employer-employee relationship. The aforementioned shifts in the labor market have presented



significant challenges to organizing, as large national and multinational companies deliberately adopt flexible employment relations that allow them to reduce their labor costs. Behind the screen of “self-employment,” convoluted value chains, and the muddled link between employees, contractors, employment agencies, and large companies, employers are able to shift the burden of social and work protections onto the workers. Labor unions, international organizations, and NGOs have adopted a number of innovative strategies to continue to organize, protect, and represent workers in a globalized world. These strategies include the formation of transnational labor unions, informal workers associations, worker cooperatives, worker centers, self-help groups, and partnerships with local organizations and NGOs.



Informal workers on the whole are often subject to extortion and repression, but women, migrants, and young workers are especially vulnerable:

1. Women tend to be disproportionately affected by casual employment patterns and are also overrepresented in the informal economy (two-thirds of the female population in developing countries work in the informal sector<sup>3</sup>). They tend to work longer hours due to the added expectation of household work and domestic duties. While globalization and modernization have brought more women into the workforce and provided additional opportunities for families to generate income, women also face sexual and physical abuse, discrimination, and other occupational risks (e.g., unsafe conditions in garment factories; more than 500 Bangladeshi workers have died in factory fires since 2006<sup>4</sup>, and the Rana Plaza factory collapse in 2013 killed over 1,100 workers<sup>5</sup>).
2. The growth of the informal economy has largely been impacted by the broader context of immigration as a source of cheap labor. Trafficking and smuggling networks often take advantage of poor migrant workers and lure them into debt bondage and modern slavery. Third party agencies and labor brokers charge desperate laborers a significant fee in exchange for the opportunity to work abroad for a higher wage than is possible in their home countries. However, many of these workers report horrific housing conditions, severe physical abuse and overwork, withholding of wages, and dangerous working conditions. The *kafala* system in many Gulf states—which gives employers almost complete control over migrant workers—has resulted in particularly egregious violations of human rights (over 1,000 migrant workers involved in construction are dying per year in Qatar, and the International Trade Union Confederation estimates that at least 4,000 more will die before the start of the 2022 World Cup). Many workers report having their passports or documents confiscated and being denied food and water. Globally, it is estimated that there are over 20 million people<sup>6</sup> working under coercive or forced labor conditions. Agriculture, fishing industries, and construction have become increasingly comprised of immigrant and slave labor.
3. Child labor is concentrated in the informal sector and in precarious jobs, often as a way to supplement families’ low earnings. An estimated 150 million children worldwide are engaged in child labor. In developing countries, nearly one in four children (ages 5 to 14) are engaged in labor considered dangerous or detrimental to their health and development; the prevalence of child labor is highest in sub-Saharan Africa<sup>7</sup>. Children are often involved in domestic work or in high-risk occupations such as farming and mining.



## Reflection Questions

1. How are *Rerum Novarum* and other Catholic labor encyclicals relevant today in the face of a changing world of work? Many Church documents express open support of unions, but how can we apply these teachings in the context of a radically changed world of work? What does it mean to be a true Christian in terms of how we treat “the least of these”? How does labor justice related to other concerns such as slavery and human trafficking, women’s rights, the environment, and others?
2. Reflect on the following quote from Pope Francis (28 October 2014):  
 “There is no worse material poverty than one that does not allow for earning one’s bread and deprives one of the dignity of work. Youth unemployment, informality, and the lack of labor rights are not inevitable; they are the result of a previous social option, of an economic system that puts profit above man; if the profit is economic, to put it above humanity or above man, is the effect of a disposable culture that considers the human being in himself as a consumer good, which can be used and then discarded.”  
 In a globalized world where laborers are increasingly viewed as replaceable commodities and valued only insofar as they have productive value, how does the Church remind us to be guided by the principles of personalism and community, and to see workers first and foremost as human beings?
3. How is the movement for workers’ rights tied to the issues of economic injustice, poverty, and inequality more broadly? How does providing workers with a living wage and access to health-care demonstrate an ethic of life and allow people to lift themselves out of poverty? Why do you think these measures have been so difficult to achieve politically?
4. Why has achieving worker justice remained an enduring struggle? What power dynamics, global forces, or other structures have contributed to creating an adversarial environment for so many workers?

## Additional Resources and Further Reading

- The Catholic Labor Network: <http://catholiclabor.org/>
- “A Catholic-Labor Revival?: Unions in the Francis Era” by John Gehring, *Commonweal Magazine*: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/catholic-labor-revival>
- “Gulf Dreams for Justice: From Rescue to Solidarity” by Paula Chakravartty and Nitasha Dhillon, *Dissent Magazine*: <http://bit.ly/2nEzKOP>
- *The Ugly Side of the Beautiful Game: Exploitation of Migrant Workers on a Qatar 2022 World Cup Site* by Amnesty International (2016 Report): <http://bit.ly/2noezOw>
- “Can You Make Clothes Without Sweatshop Labor? This Dominican Factory is Trying” by Kim Bhasin, *The Huffington Post*: <http://huff.to/2ombOOD>
- Just Employment Project: <http://lwp.georgetown.edu/jep/>
- “Organizing for Change: Workers in the Informal Economy” (5:16): <http://bitly/2oiem0e>



## Endnotes

1. International Labour Organization, *Women and Men in the Informal Economy: A Statistical Picture* (International Labour Organization (Geneva: 2002), <http://bit.ly/2nEkMFh>.
2. “About the Informal Economy,” *Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing*, <http://bit.ly/2o3FmSZ>.
3. Rene Loewenson, “Globalization and occupational health: a perspective from southern Africa,” *Bulletin of the World Health Organization* 79, no. 9 (2001): 863-868, <http://bit.ly/2oDm7Rr>.
4. Vikas Bajaj, “Fatal Fire in Bangladesh Highlights the Dangers Facing Garment Workers,” *The New York Times* (November 2012), <http://nyti.ms/2p1rINR>.
5. “Factory Collapse in Bangladesh,” *Institute for Global Labour and Human Rights*, <http://bit.ly/2nEAXSS>.
6. “Trafficked: Human Rights Abuses in the Seafood Industry,” *FishWise* (November 2013), <http://bit.ly/2o3Bxgt>.
7. “Child Labour,” Topic: Child Protection, *UNICEF*, <http://bit.ly/2oDgcLP>.