

## THE MORAL DIMENSION – JUSTICE FOR WORKERS

**Bruce Duncan \***

Chattel slavery has long been abolished almost everywhere, but the struggle to improve wages and working conditions continues, and acutely so in many countries. The struggle to humanise work remains a profoundly moral one.

Talking about the moral dimension of industrial legislation should not be seen as a superficial nod to piety or convention. ‘Moral’ is not a ‘weasel’ word. Moral means nothing less than what makes for human flourishing, for working people to grow to their full stature as responsible human beings.

I speak out of the Catholic social tradition, but most people would likely agree that transforming human labour is not just an economic matter, but involves social values and moral issues about advancing human dignity and wellbeing for all people. Fundamentally work is not just about *having more*, but of *being more* as fulfilled persons.

If Pope Leo XIII were alive today, he would be astonished that key planks in his social thinking were 115 years later being called into contention. In his famous 1891 document, *On the Condition of the Working Class*, Pope Leo

- stressed that workers had a right to a living wage, to support their families and provide against sickness and old age
- defended the right to form trade unions and to bargain collectively
- insisted that the right to private property was not absolute, but had to serve the interests of everyone, particularly the poor or disadvantaged
- urged that the ownership of property be spread more equitably, so that workers could acquire ownership of their homes, and in their farms or businesses
- and insisted that the State had the duty to regulate the economy to ensure social justice, especially by protecting the rights of working people.

Leo’s initiative came just as the Labour Movement in Australia was forming, and his document influenced Mr Justice Higgins in his Harvester Judgement of 1907, setting the pattern in Australia for the development of a system of conciliation and arbitration and the concept of the basic wage.

But individual workers, particularly the young, can easily be coerced or intimidated by employers, and hence the Church among others strongly supported collective bargaining so that employees could stand up for their rights and entitlements.

Sydney’s Cardinal Moran in 1891 commented that without comparative equality in the bargaining relationship, the phrase ‘freedom of contract’ had ‘been turned into an engine of robbery, and the very name of liberty had become a mockery’. He said that if a contract were not free and in accord with natural rights, ‘it ceases to be binding.’ He continued that too often freedom of contract came to mean liberty ‘to defraud, to oppress’.

Pope Leo would be dumb-founded to find that long-held basic principles of social justice were today contested, notably:

- the right of workers to bargain collectively and for unions to represent their members;
- the right to adequate employment and a fair and sufficient wage;
- the right to strike in extreme circumstances; and

---

\* Bruce Duncan is a priest of the Redemptorist order. He coordinates the program in social justice studies at Yarra Theological Union in Melbourne and is a consultant with Catholic Social Services Victoria.

- the existence of an independent mechanism of conciliation to settle disputes between workers and employers.

Certainly there is room for debate about how best to organise industrial relations, but this must aim to realise more fully fairness and opportunity for everyone.

Since Leo the Church has particularly rejected the view that the unregulated market would of itself produce the most desirable outcomes. Pope John Paul II warned against ‘a radical capitalist ideology’ that would exclude governments and society from measures to solve social problems, and instead ‘blindly entrusts their solution to the free development of market forces’.

He regarded work as ‘the essential key to the whole social question’, insisting that work should enhance people’s sense of dignity and self-worth. He wanted people to have a sense of working for themselves as free and responsible persons, and not to be treated just as an instrument of production or a commodity like any other. He insisted that paying a just wage was the ‘key means’ to determine if an economic system were working justly.

John Paul considered unions ‘indispensable’ in advancing the living standards of working people and expanding their social participation and education. He saw the vocation of unions as profoundly ‘ethical’, not just in supporting their own members but in contributing to wider solidarity and as ‘a mouthpiece in the struggle for social justice’.

Hence, in the view of Pope John Paul, it would be unjust to coerce individuals into workplace agreements that prevent unions being able to represent them.

It would be unjust if changes in industrial legislation were designed to preserve people’s entitlements initially, but gradually to reduce real wages over time, or expose them unfairly to cuts in wages and conditions when changing jobs or renegotiating contracts.

It would be gravely unjust if a government were to destroy the institutions protecting employees, who were then forced to take reductions in pay and conditions. Without a clear and strong regulatory system to buttress them, employers who try to maintain higher wages would be undercut by competitors insisting on reduced rates of pay.

Clearly it would violate social equity to drive down the wages of the low-paid people while handing out largesse to upper-income people in social benefits and tax advantages.

It is unjust to strip back conditions or awards without very urgent reasons if this plunges people into economic hardship and robs them of security of employment. This could reduce many to the status of day labourers, without regular income, and unable to secure bank loans.

It would be unjust to allow house prices to soar unreasonably, making it extremely difficult for young people to buy into the housing market without shouldering excessive debts. This in turn could force both partners into the job market, resulting in them postponing having children and even lowering the birthrate.

It would be unjust to strip away awards and entitlements or reduce take-home pay at a time of unprecedented economic prosperity.

It is unjust for businesses to reap high profits while squeezing the wages of their employees.

Ignoring or over-riding these moral dimensions can only result in great injustice and increasing hardship for very many Australians.